

Touchstone: Narratives in Contemporary Canadian Inuit Art

by

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### Abstract:

This thesis explores the role of a single sculpture and its relationship to key people and events in the origin of contemporary Inuit art. Alfred Gell's theoretical framework, promoting the concept that a single piece of art can have influence—agency—that creates traceable connections between the work of art, the artist and observers of the piece, is applied to a small caribou sculpture that was a gift to the noted Canadian artist James Houston from Inuit artist Naomialuk in 1948. The rupture or disjunction that lead to the beginning of the contemporary period of Inuit art can be traced to that moment and that interaction. The concept is explored by using direct conversations with John Houston (James' son and himself an artist), published works related to the life of James Houston and then, branching into the current period, through the art of noted contemporary artist Annie Pootoogook.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

In this study, I will investigate how a single sculpture given to artist and designer James Houston in 1948 is implicated in a complex set of relationships with other objects and people. This sculpture and the Houston family are at the centre of an oral tradition that describes the origin of contemporary Inuit art. I will examine James's son John Houston's history of writing and storytelling about the sculpture in order to determine how his agency and that of other actors have come to create the space occupied by Inuit art today. The project will also investigate the ways in which an Inuit sculpture of a caribou is itself a social agent in the same way that a person is. It will explore the interaction of the piece with networks, artists, curators and institutions that have helped make it into an iconic piece of Inuit art. How have John Houston and the sculpture shifted the terms by which Inuit and non-Inuit people might engage each other and what constitutes iconic Inuit art?

The Houston family's interaction with the caribou sculpture created a break, explored in detail in the thesis, between the historic and contemporary periods of Inuit art. As a means to understanding of the contemporary period, the work and life of a contemporary artist, Annie Pootoogook, will be introduced, examined in light of her relationship to Houston's legacy and using the lens of Gell's theory.

Past anthropological investigations of art have addressed its role in representation, or as a means of translation between cultures. This project, while indirectly addressing some of these issues, will forego questions of representation and instead employ theories first laid out by Alfred Gell. The first interrogates the efficacy

of art, rather than its meaning in specific, relational settings (Gell, 1998). It will then interrogate the substantive content of various but specific pieces of Inuit art, and some of the more immediate networks to which they are closely related. These theories privilege specific artworks in particular relationships, rather than locating works or genre within a broader cultural sphere.

Alfred Gell's assertion that art is best studied on a small, biographical scale also informs the project's methodology. Other work has shown that stories on Canadian indigenous art, themselves agents, can interact with both people and art in networks to affect relationships (Cruikshank, 1998). John Houston's lengthy involvement with Inuit art production and storytelling therefore makes his own biographical narrative and the art that it describes an ideal locus for study. The proposed research questions will therefore be addressed first through in-depth interviews with John Houston driven by the aforementioned body of theory. These interviews will be grounded in a review of relevant literature, including an extended discussion on the history of art within the discipline of anthropology. The discussion of Annie Pootoogook's contributions, unfolding much more recently, will both enlarge the discussion of the contemporary period, and will provide insight into the Houston's ongoing role within it. There is, within her story, a glimpse of what might yet come. I will then situate this project's theoretical framework within that broader literature and review the project's methodology.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE**

The Houston family has lived and worked in the Canadian Arctic for over fifty years. Their long involvement with the region began when John's father James Houston, a passionate artist and outdoorsman, was offered a free flight on a plane bound for Port Harrison, Northern Quebec, during a stay in northern Ontario to "sketch and paint the purely Canadian lands and inhabitants" he found there (Graburn, 2004). He made sketches of the local inhabitants, one of whom gave him a small carving of a caribou. Houston asked how old it was and expressed some disappointment when he learned that it was only a few hours old, but then began to imagine the possibilities for more art production among the Inuit. This pivotal encounter, instigated seemingly by chance, would have a profound impact on Inuit and Canadian cultural conceptions in the coming decades. My in-depth interviews with his son provide his perspective on these historical events and their continued impact today. The story told by the Houstons reappears again and again – in magazine profiles and in art-related publications, but most notably in narratives created directly by the Houstons themselves in the form of films, children's books, and lectures. In most cases, the story hinges upon a small sculpture of a caribou made by an Inuit artist named Naomialuk, and the gift of that piece from Naomialuk to James Houston. The unusual emphasis on this particular moment in the making of Inuit art is championed by not just a single person, but by different individuals in different generations. It is also told using different storytelling techniques in different media. The story has been an integral part of John Houston's professional life, but its

significance is also apparent when visiting his home – a place full of reminders of the family.

In the following decades, the Houstons worked as central figures in the creation, promotion and circulation of Inuit art. Since that time, Inuit art has become an internationally recognized and circulated art form with political and economic implications for the North and beyond. This story has developed as it has been retold many times since, not only by James Houston but also by his son John. John Houston states, simply, that “the story of how this happened is the story of my family” (Houston, 1998).

### **1.3 ART IN ANTHROPOLOGY**

Anthropological literature addressing art has long occupied a unique position within the broader discipline, for a time exhibiting

an apparent lack of dialogue between work which effectively analyzed art practices within local anthropological settings, and emerging preoccupations with the politics of art, cross-cultural relations, and representation – debates that for a time centered upon the famous or notorious ‘Primitivism’ show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York... (Thomas, 2001, p. 1)

A 1992 volume of ethnographic writing on art shows a focus then, as in the 1970s, on “communication, meaning, and the distinctiveness of indigenous ways of seeing and aesthetic systems” (Ibid). The increasing theoretical gulf between conventional approaches still being applied to the anthropology of art and the preoccupations of anthropology in general became most apparent in museum contexts not only at the Museum of Modern Art but also at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later at the Royal Ontario Museum (Clifford, 1988; Errington, 1998; Butler, 1999). “During the



winter of 1984–85,” Clifford observes, “one could encounter tribal objects in an unusual number of locations around New York City” (Clifford, 1988, p. 189). Both the New York and Toronto exhibitions, though very different in their curatorial approaches, elicited not only academic controversy but also protests from the viewing public because of their perceived insensitivity to the cultures and peoples represented by the objects (Butler, 1999). Indeed, objects that had previously been described as either tribal or primitive became controversial in many museum settings by the late 1980s, whether presented as fine art objects or as culturally situated artifacts (Clifford, 1988). Despite differing curatorial approaches, the shows received mixed – and often very negative – reactions from the public in general, and individuals somehow associated with the cultures from which the pieces originated. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new Rockefeller wing and the *Primitivism* show presented objects with obvious ritual and spiritual significance as fine art pieces like those displayed in other parts of the museum. *Into the Heart of Africa*, on the other hand, was intended to be seen as “a critical counterpoint to colonial collecting and museum ethics, [but] the exhibition was seen by many as glorification of colonialism” (Schildkraut, 1991). In Canada, the Glenbow Museum’s *Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* elicited similar accusations of continued colonialisms from the public (Harrison, 1988). Although anthropologists at the time addressed the obvious cultural and political concerns raised by these exhibitions, anthropological theories on art remained remarkably limited and focused on a specific subset of art. Thomas contends that at the time, “the anthropology of art seemed to have no body of theory,

no perspective, no theory that could be disembedded from the ethnography of indigenous art and applied to art in general” (Thomas, 2001, p. 1).

This apparent lack of extensively applicable theory or definition of art is made all the more unusual given the extensive body of early writing on art in anthropology by prominent theorists from Franz Boas to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Franz Boas’s definitive *Primitive Art* “provided a firm link with the art discourses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but at the same time made art relevant to anthropologists who followed him by freeing it from simple deterministic theories” (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, p. 35). Boas’s study of Northwest Coast aboriginal art also makes a distinction between formal and symbolic art, which can exist independently of one another or together in a single piece (Boas, 1927, p. 183). Boas developed his theories when anthropology was itself a project centred on ethnographic collections in museums. Morphy and Perkins (2006, pp. 5–6) argue that the development of anthropology into an academic discipline with ethnography as its central project led to a decreased emphasis on material culture and theoretical developments in art. There were a few successive attempts by anthropologists to define art, perhaps most notably D’Azevedo’s (1958) conception of aesthetics. The place of aesthetic theory, especially within the structuralist school influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, remained a major influence throughout the century (Wiseman, 2007).

Even before the controversies of the 1980s, some anthropologists began to question the approach typified by Anthony Forge that sought to ascribe meaning to “ethnographic art” by describing indigenous ways of seeing (Thomas, 2001, p. 2).

Nelson Graburn repositioned art as an object of study in his 1976 edited collection, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*. This collection

drew attention to this category of material culture and also gave it theoretical significance as 'Fourth World art', insisting that some of its most salient characteristics were comprehensible only through exploration of the distinctive social contexts of its production and circulation. (Myers, 2004, p.205)

It was later museum-centred debates built on Graburn's arguments that no doubt led anthropologists to "embrace issues around representation and cultural politics" (Thomas 2001, p. 1). The "fetishization and the devaluation of the 'primitive'" (Ibid) also became a prominent debate in this period, perhaps most notably with Sally Price's 1989 work *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* and later with Shelly Errington's *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (1998). Both of these works situate a narrative of primitivism within the museum, although Errington demonstrates that it operates in other economic and political contexts (Errington, 1998).

While ideas of cultural politics gained increasing prominence in the discipline, British anthropologist Alfred Gell pronounced, "The complaint is commonly heard that art is a neglected topic in present-day social anthropology, especially in Britain" (Gell, 1992, p. 40). He further contends that

The marginalization of studies of primitive art, by contrast to the immense volume of studies of politics, ritual, exchange, and so forth, is too obvious a phenomenon to miss, especially if one draws a contrast with the situation prevailing before the advent of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. (Ibid)

Morphy and Perkins (2006) later reflect that the absence of art from studies in the disciplines related to anthropology has been pronounced until recently.<sup>1</sup> Gell's solution to this perceived blind spot is a "hypercritical" (Graburn, 2004, p. 142) new theory first outlined in 1992 and then elaborated in his posthumously published 1998 book *Art and Agency*. Gell radically eschews any analysis of semiotic or linguistic origin, insisting that art should instead be viewed as an active agent within specific relationships, rather than as mere objects inscribed with metaphorical or symbolic meaning. Furthermore, he insists that basic cognitive reaction, rather than aesthetic appreciation, is the desired response in a viewer of art. Aesthetically oriented analyses, he alleges, are the province of art history, and they assume pseudo-religious veneration of art-objects without explicitly stating so (Gell, 1998). Bruno Latour posits that art and religion are based on a form of iconophilia that often makes them essentially indistinguishable from one another (Latour, 1999).

Finally, Gell suggests that the definition of art is contingent not on a reducible quality it possesses, but on its location in a specific set of relationships that he describes as an "art-like situation" (Ibid, 13). Any object within such a situation, he claims, can be analyzed in these terms. Gell intentionally tests this theory, stretching the limits of what might normally be studied as art by defending anthropologist Susan Vogel's unconventional display of a Zande hunting net as an art object in her 1988 New York show *Art/Artifact* (Gell, 1996).

Critics and adherents alike recognize the widespread influence of Gell's work (Layton, 2003; Myers, 2004; Miller, 2005; Morphy, 2009). His work has even inspired work in other disciplines and volumes debating its merits (Thomas, 2001). Fred Myers

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<sup>1</sup> Although Gell reasons that the absence of art from British anthropology had been particularly pronounced, there are "similar periods of neglect," albeit perhaps for different reasons, in American schools of anthropology (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, 7–8).

asserted in 2004 that there are now two dominant strands within the anthropology of art: one that continues “the primitivism debates around and after the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibition” and a second which “acknowledges the bouleversement offered by...Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency*” (Myers, 2004, pp. 203–4).

#### **1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This project is informed theoretically by the recent developments since the publication of Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*. The most radical aspects of Gell’s theory are briefly listed above, but its application also involves the deployment of a model Gell terms the “art nexus” (Gell, 1998, p. 13). Used to dissect “art-like situations,” Gell employs an entirely new vocabulary to describe the art nexus. The art object, among others, becomes the index, which “in Peircean semiotics is a ‘natural sign,’ that is, an identity from which the observer can make a causal inference of some kind, or an inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person” (Ibid). Viewing the index “permits a particular cognitive operation [Gell] identifies as the *abduction of agency*,” specifically, “a case of synthetic inference ‘where we find some very curious circumstances, which would be explained by the supposition of some general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition’” (Gell, 1998, p. 14, citing Pierce, p. 624). “Abduction covers the grey area where semiotic inference (of meanings from signs) merges with the *hypothetical inferences* of a non-semiotic (or not conventionally semiotic) kind” (Ibid, p. 14, emphasis in original). Although the index itself is always centrally situated within the art nexus, the very nature of abduction indicates the presence of

other actors. The sculpture of the caribou by Naomialuk is just such a figure, indicating numerous social relationships by its presence, even if they are not immediately obvious. Miller states, “This is not a theory of causal inference, but rather a theory of inferred intentionality. In short, he argues that we naturally tend to imagine there must have been some kind of social agency whenever we encounter an effect” (Miller, 2005, p. 13).

Because “the effect of ‘aesthetization’ of response-theory is simply to equate the reactions of the ethnographic other, as far as possible, to our own,” Gell also shuns any talk of art “appreciation,” focusing instead on the *recipient* of the agency of the index. In a traditional, archetypal art-like situation, the recipient would be a “passive viewer” of an art piece (Ibid, p. 6). Gell forms a broadly applicable theory of social agency that can be used to analyze objects other than those that might commonly be referred to as art. Even if one does not employ his terms for specific actors, his intention is to examine the trajectory and effectiveness of art in specific contexts.

The *artist* is therefore the originator of the inferred intentionality that has some effect on the *recipient* through an *index*. In order to produce the index, the artist engages prototypes: “entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily” (Ibid, p. 27). The prototype, in the case of Naomialuk’s sculpture, is clearly a caribou, but Gell points out that a prototype can be either something the artist has seen (an actual caribou, or perhaps another carving), or something in the artist’s imagination (Ibid, p. 25). There is ample evidence, for example, of older traditions of stone carving

in the Canadian North, some dating back to the prehistoric Thule people (Laugrand & Oosten, 2008, p. 69). This theory might initially seem to confirm that the index is fundamentally representational, but it is essential to note that the representational nature of the index is only inferred and only possible through the abduction of the index; it is not representational in a linguistic sense. Art-like situations thus involve at least two of four elements: the artist, the index, the recipient, and the prototype. In the simplest of art-like situations, each of the two actors functions as either an agent or patient – a classification applied to denote the directionality of the agency moving between the actors. The index does not necessarily need to be expressed in a function of the art nexus, but its presence is always implied and essential to the situation (Ibid, pp. 35–6).

Here I will explain these points in relation to Gell’s theory, which has been described, along with the work of Bruno Latour, as “the two most recent influential additions to the theory of material culture” (Miller, 2005, p. 11). Gell and Latour both examine the means by which objects mediate relationships between people. Latour’s primary locus of study is science and especially the laboratory, but he has also applied his actor-network theory to other disciplines and other kinds of social knowledge production. Latour’s terminology differs from that of Alfred Gell, but he too has pointed to the iconophilic nature of both artistic and scientific relationships (Latour, 1998). Both propose that art (by its common Western definition) is often venerated in the same way as religious iconography, even when outside of an explicitly religious context (Latour, 1999 Gell, 1998). Where Gell discusses the abduction of agency and the fascination that artwork

elicits in the viewer, Latour is interested in images' ability to point to or represent something absent. Both these conceptions highlight an art object's ability to stand for something other than the object, something more. Images, for Latour, can point to intricate and stable social relationships that are not immediately present or obvious. The ability of art to incite in its viewer (as recipient) a causal inference embodied by the index (the "grey area" referred to by Gell) lends itself naturally to religious worship. Gell states, "I cannot tell the difference between religious and aesthetic exaltation; art-lovers, it seems to me, do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their *de facto* idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe" (Gell, 1998, p. 118). Gell and Latour recognize the power of objects to act within socio-material networks – even if such networks are traditionally the province of other academic disciplines. Both religious worship and the abduction of agency infer the existence of stable social relationships beyond immediate objects and actors. The strength of these objects is contingent upon such an inference, without which an object has no appreciable relational agency.

Ultimately, both theories confirm the importance and agency of objects in socio-material networks, and both emphasize this power by drawing from examples that are beyond their normal field of study: "Gell (1998: 20–1) and Latour (1999: 176–180) have similar discussions of the agency of guns and landmines as against those that fire or plant them, in order to make their points about the centrality of agency" (Miller, 2005, p. 13). Gell also uses examples of cars, basalt stones and children's toys as examples to enforce the seemingly



arbitrary nature of objects that become classified as art – a move that echoes “found object” art forms championed by some twentieth-century contemporary artists.

### **1.5 ART, AGENCY AND APPROPRIATION**

Recently, a few anthropologists have attempted to apply Alfred Gell’s study in new ways. Arnd Schneider’s 2006 ethnography *Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity in Argentina* explores the use of indigenous styles and motifs by urban and international art dealers as a mode of identity creation. The practice of appropriation is essential to his theoretical framework, and he also relies heavily on theories of globalization to track art production and movement. Graburn’s retelling and analysis of the story of Inuit art’s emergence is also intriguing in its unique application of Alfred Gell’s theory. He suggests “carrying [Gell’s theory of art and agency] further by following Glass [2004] when he focuses on ‘...the use of social narrative in which the movement of objects stands for the story of a people’” (Graburn, 2004, pp. 142–3). Narratives themselves can indeed have such metaphorical implications (Cruikshank, 1998), but while Graburn does provide a detailed account of networks in which Inuit art was initially produced, his approach differs in some essential respects from Gell’s theory of art and agency. Graburn suggests that the theory can be applied much more generally, yet Gell states:

A basic constraint on the theory being developed here is that unless there is an *index*, there can be no abductions of agency, and since the topic of this theoretical enterprise is precisely the abduction of agency

from indexes, the index has to be present for the abduction of agency to proceed (Gell, 1998, pp. 35–6).

Graburn's analysis is more concerned with the symbolic significance of a narrative than interrogating the specific agency and efficacy of art pieces.

Appropriation and identity are also central to Graburn's narrative. Unlike Schneider, he claims that Inuit art was originally a product of mainly non-indigenous actors but has since been re-appropriated by native peoples. Together, these pieces indicate the possibility of opposing trajectories for art in post-colonial contexts both before and after re-appropriation. The span of the Houston family's involvement in contemporary Canadian Inuit art (since the invention of the term) makes it difficult to apply Graburn's symbolic theory to their story.

Both Graburn and Schneider demonstrate the ways in which it is possible for a narrative about art to reveal the actors surrounding it. Schneider agrees that appropriation can be a means of empowerment for non-indigenous actors, but Graburn implies that early Inuit artists had comparatively little agency in their production of art in the early contemporary phase, with production controlled by Southern actors. Morphy and Perkins are cautious of appropriation as a critical device, stating,

...the critique of the appropriation of art to create representations of 'other' cultures must not itself be essentialized over all places and times. It has been recognized recently that such essentialization denies the agency of indigenous peoples in *both past and present*. Indigenous people have often used art as a means to economic survival, as a demonstration of skills and cultural values, and as a means to assert cultural identity in a changing world. (emphasis added) (2006, p. 19)

The symbolic ownership of art, if over-emphasized, selectively ignores economic realities and the agency of artists within shifting networks. Moreover, the

entanglement of networks in colonial contexts makes the distinction of ownership and reclamation thereof difficult upon minute examination. The clear division of symbolic ownership between past and present (in this case between the historic and contemporary periods) may also be indicative of a view of art and politics derived not from anthropology, but early art historical schools (Pinney, 2005). Furthermore, Graburn's own carefully detailed history of institutional involvement in the early history of the contemporary period nonetheless provides very little information of the Inuit actors involved.

Appropriation as theory is inherently difficult to apply to John Houston and his involvement in the world of Inuit art. He contends that while his father had a seminal role in the early history of Inuit art, the work was initially collaborative in nature. Additionally, his continued work in the North and with Inuit art implies a process that is not just a simple dialogue, but rather a deep and committed engagement. His work fuses and enforces traditions that ultimately point to a collapse of the dichotomy of symbolic ownership and non-ownership, and the problematization of other easily discernible categories such as art and non-art.

## **1.6 NARRATIVE AND OBJECTIVES**

Graburn and Schneider reintroduce narrative and appropriation into discussions on large bodies of art in national contexts. Re-appropriation is one possible response to the controversies of representation from the 1980s. Other earlier approaches have yielded different results. Julie Cruikshank's 1998 book *The Social Life of Stories* provides a glimpse of narratives interacting with art on

precisely the scale examined by Alfred Gell. Cruikshank builds on some observations made by James Clifford at the Portland Museum of Art in the 1980s. There, the objects “acted as memory aids for the telling of elaborate stories,” Cruikshank relates (1998, p. 99). These stories are traditional in nature, but eventually become implicated in seemingly contemporary issues. Cruikshank herself cites a similar example from her own research involved with recording the life stories of Kitty Smith, a woman of Tlingit and Tagish descent who carved “casually” in the early twentieth century (Ibid, pp. 100–1).

Initially, Cruikshank argues that divisions between the analysis of language and analysis of “material culture” have been divided into “two seemingly different ethnographic approaches,” and she advocates for the place of both in museums (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 5). Cruikshank asserts the importance of objects within life histories. Her approach, however, is somewhat dissimilar from the linguistic analyses of art from which Gell also distances himself. Cruikshank is concerned with the trajectory of oral storytelling and its continued purpose. “Oral tradition – tools of the mind – weighs nothing and can accompany a traveler anywhere,” she insists (Ibid). By highlighting oral traditions and life stories, she demonstrates not only that objects can play central roles in life histories, but that action-oriented approaches to stories can open unexpected avenues of research.

Gell’s theory provides a valuable tool for understanding the specific steps through which the history of contemporary Inuit art has unfolded, and it sheds new light on the connection between this emergence and the art, lives and actions of John and James Houston.

Whereas theories that rely on appropriation or symbolic significance construe the emergence of contemporary Inuit art as the result of interactions between cultures, Gell allows us to look at this event as the result of interaction between actors. For Gell these relationships must precede any discussion of competing narratives and consequently do not require the rejection of one in favour of the other. Rather, narratives themselves are understood as social actors in the same way as objects and people. By relativizing questions of symbolic ownership or cultural meaning in the context of these networks, Gell's work can help uncover the specific actors involved in contemporary Inuit art's emergence and trace this emergence through the forging of new relationships.

In chapter two, I examine the story of the origin of contemporary Inuit art as retold by James Houston's son John. In this story, Houston's fascination with a sculpture brings him into contact with Inuit art and, specifically, with an Inuit artist, Naomialuk. I will focus on elaborating the way this story hinges on the interactions of a small group of actors and how the changing relationships that characterize the start of the modern period of Inuit art can be identified in these interactions. Gell's theory will help to trace the agency that defines these interactions, showing that they are not representative of broader cultural change, but are productive of change. Specifically, Gell's work on the abduction of agency will be used to chart the development of a three-pronged relationship that informs Inuit artistic output and consumption in the years to follow, not least through the repetition of the origin story examined in this chapter.

In chapter three, the activity of these actors is considered from the perspective of broader networks. Using Bruno Latour's concept of mediators, the implications of Houston's origin story can be considered in the context of broader identities that enroll many actors on a large scale. In this chapter I will reintroduce the idea of meaning and meaning-based interpretations of art and link it to the efficacy of art through a discussion of Latour's ideas regarding different kinds of representation in mediator networks. This will allow us to account for the work of specific mediators when considering the influence of broader cultural narratives.

## CHAPTER 2: BETWEEN NAOMIALUK AND THE HOUSTON LEGACY

The first time I saw the sculpture by Naomialuk, the young artist that James Houston met in Inukjuak, I must confess it seemed somewhat unremarkable. At that time, I had only a passing interest in contemporary Canadian Inuit art and although I'd seen *Songs in Stone, An Arctic Journey Home*, in which the sculpture is prominently featured, I failed to recognize it when it was shown to me. I first met John Houston, briefly, in the spring of 2007 when I was assigned to give tours of his home as part of a fundraiser for the art gallery where I worked at the time. Before the doors were thrown open to eager ticketholders, John's then-wife Heather gave me a brief tour of the home, providing information on the (many) notable pieces of art and antiques in their collection. Sensing my growing enthusiasm for their earlier pieces, she kindly offered to show me one of her favourites. She disappeared into a small, private room in the house and emerged holding a small stone animal. Its removable bone antlers were taped to its belly for safe storage, and while beautiful, it wasn't nearly as captivating or beautiful as the sculpture I'd seen in the film.

It was only years later, after my first interview with John Houston, that I would recognize the sculpture Heather had shown me. After I expressed my interest in it and the stories he and his father told about it, he too left for a far corner of the house and emerged with the same sculpture. This time, he inserted the antlers into the holes on the caribou's head and placed it on the white tissues in which it had been wrapped, and to my eye it looked every bit as enchanting as it had in his film. The

delicate antlers, the pinprick eyes and its gently flowing curves replicated with simple economy the form of a caribou.

## **2.1 MINIATURES IN INUIT ART BEFORE JAMES HOUSTON**

The story describing the moment at which a small sculpture of a caribou was given to James Houston has been told and retold for many years. An early account by James Houston of this moment can be found in the catalogue for the Winnipeg Art Gallery's 1976 exhibition, *Port Harrison/Inukjuak*, although by then it had already appeared in popular media a few times – and it would later appear in James Houston's autobiography *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller* (Auger, 2005). His son John elegantly positions this story not only within a biographical narrative on his family, but also within a broader story about the creation of the genre later known as contemporary Canadian Inuit art in *Songs in Stone, An Arctic Journey Home*.

This particular event might not immediately seem unusual due to the long tradition of exchange and art object production that has existed for many years. “All over the Arctic, and for thousands of years, Inuit people have been making miniatures,” Laugrand and Oosten state (2008, p. 69). Artistic production in the Arctic actually draws from a variety of traditions, the oldest of which were held by the Thule and other Dorset cultures. The production of miniatures and other decorated objects with probable shamanic functions was typical of the prehistoric period of Inuit art, as art historians now call it (Auger, 2005). The precise role of these earlier objects in daily life is still a matter of speculation and debate, but McGhee (1977, cited in Auger, 2005) suggests that they had symbolic associations derived from their material



composition. An object made of walrus ivory, for example, could have been involved in rituals pertaining to the walrus hunt. Others have hypothesized that miniatures may have functioned as toys, but as Auger says, “The suggestion put forward by Dienje Kenyon and Charles D. Arnold (1985) that Thule miniatures, and by Robert W Park (1998) that miniatures in Inuit culture generally, may have served as toys does not contradict the possibility that their materials were selected with attention to taboos and Mythological associations” (Ibid, p. 99).

Laugrand and Oosten also acknowledge the ambiguity of the objects, but point out that the objects would serve important functions in either capacity:

They seem like innocent toys or ornaments but, in a shamanic perspective, they can easily become effective weapons and have great transformative power. As toys, they are instrumental in transforming children into adults; as ornaments they may be charms or amulets; as amulets they may be weapons in the spiritual world; and as weapons or offerings, they may take life or generate it. (Laugrand & Oosten, 2008, p. 69)

That the miniatures may have been used as toys (if not exclusively as such) supports Alfred Gell’s assertion that objects not normally thought of as art in a traditional sense function as agents in a manner similar to that of art. Toys are of particular interest to Alfred Gell, since he is also skeptical of the rigid distinction made between toys, religious objects and traditional Western conceptions of fine art. To highlight this problem, he describes the role of the doll in the Western European tradition:

Consider a little girl with her doll. She loves her doll. Her doll is her best friend (she says). Would she toss her doll overboard from a lifeboat in order to save her bossy elder brother from drowning? No way. This may seem a trivial example, and the kinds of relations small girls form with their dolls are far from being “typical” human behavior. But it is not a trivial example at all; in fact it is an archetypal example of the subject matter of the Anthropology of art. We only think it is not because it is an affront to our dignity to make comparisons between small girls showering affection on their dolls and us, mature souls, admiring Michelangelo’s

*David*. But what is *David* if it is not a big doll for grown-ups? This is not really a matter of devaluing *David* so much as revaluating little girls' dolls, which are truly remarkable objects, all things considered. They are certainly social beings, 'members of the family' at any rate. From dolls to idols is but a short step, and from Idols to sculptures by Michelangelo another, hardly longer. (Gell, 1998 p. 18)

The functional ambiguity of the objects shows that Gell's broad, relational definition of art is often necessary, since art can have more than one function at once.

Furthermore, without traditional institutional definitions of art, it becomes clearer that many objects can function in an art-like manner. Gell's example also highlights the familial bond often formed with these objects, a connection that John Houston emphasizes in his work. These objects are both intergenerational and instructive – much as Naomialuk's sculpture has been to the Houston family.

The later emergence of periodic exchange in miniatures and other small decorative objects with traders from the south – whalers, missionaries and furriers – along with continued artistic production of older art forms characterize the historic period of Inuit art (Auger, 2004). Early trading partners were mainly whalers, but the decline in whaling in the early twentieth century was supplemented by increased trade in products such as fur (Ibid, p. 101). The boundaries of the historic period are, nonetheless, difficult to define; while some art historians describe it as the period during which art objects were traded with some regularity with non-Inuit actors, others use it to describe any art made by post-Thule Inuit people (Crandall, 2000, p. 21). Most scholars agree, however, that the period of contemporary Inuit art begins at some point shortly after 1948, and that it would not have become the corpus recognized today without the work of James Houston and his family (Graburn, 2004, p. 147).

If the historic period can be characterized by the collection of decorative objects or cultural artifacts, it is important to consider the weight that Gell gives to these everyday objects. Toys can be social actors, and, importantly, individual objects can be involved in multiple relationships. As we will see in the next section, the capacity of objects to take on multiple roles is a key trait that must be appreciated in order to understand how an art-like situation can emerge. The transition between two periods in art may often be situated in terms of shifting social or cultural realities. However, the change from the historical to modern period in Inuit art does not simply involve a change in taste or subject matter. It is also the artist – and their relationship to the viewer – that changes. In the encounter between Houston and Naomialuk, an artist emerges for the first time in front of a Southern buyer. Houston finds himself face to face with an artist, and it is the art object itself which brings about this encounter. An examination of the multiple relations that this object is involved in will enable us to trace the particular transformations that lead from the historical to the contemporary period of Inuit art.

## **2.2 ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY INUIT ART**

James Houston's life has been described by a number of people in many ways. He wrote a few autobiographical works himself, and he was the subject of a 1988 profile in the *New Yorker*. His life was filled with many accomplishments apart from his work with Inuit art – he was for many years a designer for Steuben Glass in New York and he worked as an advisor on a number of films – but his earlier work in the Arctic remains the focus of most of the stories that his son continues to tell about him.

The Canadian arctic was in a state of dramatic flux by the time that James Houston arrived there. Trade and trading posts were well established in many parts of the Arctic in this period, but newer developments at the instigation of the federal government caused abrupt and radical shifts in the mid-twentieth century. Inuit communities were forcibly resettled in a number of schemes between 1939 and 1963, causing incredible hardship for the Inuit involved (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). Inukjuak (formerly Port Harrison) was the setting of an infamous relocation of many of its residents to sites much further north (Marcus, 1992). The federal government eventually apologized for the Inukjuak resettlement in 2010 (<http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100016115/1100100016116>). In the years following Houston's encounter with Naomialuk and his sculpture, these resettlements and other federal policies had a tremendous impact on the traditional economies of the North.

James and later John both cite the moment in 1948 in Inukjuak as an essential, formative experience that instigated a life's work and a new style of art. It was preceded, as John tells it, by a spontaneous exchange. John Houston, who was travelling in Northern Ontario in order to sketch and paint the wilderness, was given the chance to visit a few communities in the far North on a plane taking a doctor to areas too small and remote for viable hospital care. He was immediately entranced by the landscape and the kindness of the Inuit he encountered. In Inukjuak, he took out his sketchpad and produced a few basic renderings of the local children. John Houston recounts:

My father drew like other people breathe or drink water [...] He was there on the beach, making these drawings and he started to perceive that there were people around him [...] He suddenly felt very close, very included – now that part of it was nothing new to him because he'd been making

drawings all over the world: Italy, Mexico – and people would look over his shoulder, and watch the drawing resolve itself, but there was a very clear separation (and I don't think my father stopped to think about this until he had something to compare it to); they were the audience, if you like, and he was the artist. But things got a little mixed up on that beach in Inukjuak. (J. Houston, June 15)

That things got “mixed up” seems to be an essential point in the story – James Houston recognizes that his experience is different, but doesn't yet understand why. John is also careful to underline an almost ineffable distance between his father and the children watching him. John continues:

One of the people gathered around at a moment reached out their hand, very clearly wanting that drawing pad, and so my father said he remarked at the time – I mean, mentally he noted – that that was the first time that [...] someone had ever requested his pad before, and he handed it over with a little bit of, if not apprehension, then curiosity certainly [...] He felt they probably wanted to leaf through the other pages or something. And then [their] hand came out for the pencil, and that was singular, and my father, more curious than ever, handed over the pencil and this person, whose name doesn't seem to be recorded [...] took this pencil and made a little caricature of my father. (Ibid)

This is James Houston's first encounter with an Inuit person producing art.

“Naomialuk, who made that sculpture, was part of that gathering on that day,” John tells me. Later, he adds, his father sees something even more unexpected:

As my father tells it, up the beach comes this fellow [Naomialuk] [...] and he's kind of shaking his fist and I wonder – over the years he told this story a lot – and I think he found it lent a bit of a drama to it, that he'd want the audience to be wondering about the outcome so you would think “what could this guy lead to? A punch in the nose?” [...] but it's hard to imagine my father offending Naomialuk during his short visit. In any case, up comes [...] Naomialuk waving his fist, if not shaking it in my father's face, and my father was certainly without a doubt curious as to how this [situation] was going to resolve itself, and then as he came closer stopping and opening his hand to reveal this caribou, which I'll show you a little later, and this caribou perhaps simultaneously being the last piece of the historic period and the first piece of the contemporary art period.

This story contains all of the essential elements of one that his father told many times.

A version of the story appears in *Songs in Stone: An Arctic Journey Home*. In the film,

when James describes Naomialuk opening his hand, he opens his own to reveal the sculpture. The physical sculpture is not only described in the story, its visual presence is an essential part of the storytelling – James Houston repeated the same gesture for me during our interview. Mary Keirstead’s 1988 *New Yorker* profile of James Houston also mentions his voyage to Moosonee, Moose Factory and on to Inukjuak. There, he saw the “people all laughing away and laughing. I saw the rocks, the autumn tundra, long skeins of ice drifting south to melt in Hudson Bay, and I knew this was the place I was looking for” (Kierstead, 1988, p. 37). He stayed in Inukjuak for some five months, often having difficulty adjusting to the climate, diet and learning the language. ““We sometimes thought we’d have to give you away’ one of them told him later. ‘We didn’t know what to do with you, you were so clumsy,’” Kierstead relates. She also makes clear that early on, Houston viewed the landscape and its inhabitants as an artist, and she also emphasizes the encounter with Naomialuk.

From the beginning, Houston made drawings of Eskimos. They called him Saomik, “The left-handed one.” Sometimes they would take the drawing away and make drawings of him. When he couldn’t act out a question, he would draw it, and often, they would draw the answer.

On his third day, a hunter came to him with a clenched fist and opened it to reveal a small stone carving of a caribou with ivory eyes and horns. He presented the carving to Houston. Houston had seen Eskimo carvings only in a museum, some of them over a thousand years old, and he was bowled over. In return, he cracked out (a) can of peaches ... the Eskimos peeled off the label of the can, licked it, and stuck it to the wall of the Igloo, just as they often did with Houston’s drawings (Ibid).

In this account, the nameless stone-carver is a key figure in this pivotal moment in Houston’s life where every quotidian chore (doubtlessly still exotic to Houston) is suffused with artistic production and artistic exchange. Here, we are also reminded

how astounded Houston was when he first saw Naomialuk's sculpture, and the subsequent steps that Houston took because of it.

Notably absent from these accounts is any detailed information on Naomialuk himself. For the many times that this story is repeated, we know little about him apart from his famously clenched fist, a detail about which John Houston himself expressed scepticism during our interview (June 15, 2010). James Houston spent many months in Inukjuak, but his work for the government and in the film and art worlds brought him to other parts of the North shortly after this. John Houston is not entirely out of contact with some of the people involved in this part of Inuit art history, stating that he recently became Facebook friends with a relative of Naomialuk's. But he does acknowledge that further research could fill out the sparse image formed by his narrative. Even some essential parts of the story are hard to verify with precision, as John says: "Whether Naomialuk [is] wishing to communicate something perhaps, or whether he's been working on it, and put some finishing touches to it – it's hard to know..."

Hearing him describe the boundaries of his family's knowledge, I can't help but think of his first documentary film – *Songs in Stone: An Arctic Journey Home*. The film's plot follows John Houston's father on a journey to the Arctic to bring his late mother's ashes to their final resting place. Early in the film, John says he regrets not having more film of his mother, and for want of anything better he plays an audio recording of her describing her passion for Canadian art. He clearly wishes that he could share more about these moments in his father's life. Nonetheless, John Houston

still has the stories of his father, and the “touchstone,” as he calls Naomialuk’s caribou, at their centre.

Academic accounts of these events are also somewhat sparser, and in fact put little emphasis on Naomialuk’s sculpture. Graburn describes him finding “a large number of souvenirs and toys which caught his fancy as being so different, so fresh in conception – in comparison with much of the rest of the art world and indeed with other more commercialized ethnic arts” (Graburn, 2004, p. 146). Heather Crandall describes the event only in passing: “In 1948 Houston acquired about 20 Inuit ‘souvenirs’ from Inukjuak which so impressed the Canadian Handicrafts Guild that arrangements were made to encourage carving production in the south” (Crandall, 2005, p. 101). It is not within the scope or objective of this project to verify a single, authentic version of this story (although these accounts do not factually contradict Houston’s story). It must, however, be noted that this moment is clearly more significant to the Houston family than to others researching the early creation of contemporary Inuit art.

There were other figures at the same time who were, to some lesser degree, instrumental in the early development of contemporary Canadian Inuit art, but none have the reputation and range of practice of James Houston (Graburn, 2004). Fred Myers, however, describes a startlingly similar sequence of events that occurred later in an Australian aboriginal context:

The development of acrylic painting began at the settlement of Papunya in 1971 under the sponsorship of art teacher Geoff Bardon, whose own book (1979) chronicles the transformation of indigenous forms of graphic representation – signs and designs deployed in ceremony, body decoration, cave paintings, and sand stories – into paintings on Masonite and canvas board for sale. (Marcus & Myers, 1995, p. 58)



Bardon went on to found cooperatives not entirely unlike those that John Houston championed. Astonishingly, Bardon also worked with his son on a book about the origins of contemporary Australian aboriginal painting later in his life, and was the subject of a documentary. There are many obvious differences between Inuit and Australian aboriginal art; Australian aboriginal art rarely took the form of sculpture, is often not at all figurative, and its pre-colonial purposes are better documented. Nonetheless, there are notable similarities in not just the social and political milieux in which they were made, but also transitions of the two modes of artistic production into the international fine art market. Much like John Houston's, the intervention and encouragement of Geoff Bardon marks a new period and style of artistic production as well as a continuation of earlier traditions.

Fred Myers, writing in 1995, is concerned with the apparent disjunction between stories that place Australian aboriginal acrylic painting “meaningfully within a cultural order” and competing accounts provided by cosmopolitan art dealers, Aboriginal artists, and anthropologists who are called upon to translate (in Myers's case, often reluctantly) culturally derived meaning between distinct cultural spheres (Ibid, 1995, p. 59). He remains deeply ambivalent towards the discrepancies in narrative, but concludes that the arguments are themselves a form of “cultural production” for all of the parties involved. This problem is not dissimilar from those first highlighted by Graburn in 1976: that narratives that purport to give meaning to contemporary aboriginal art are often contradictory, and are derived from different cultures and localities.

Instead of concentrating on the “competition” between these narratives, however, an analysis employing Alfred Gell’s theory focuses on the art objects that connect them. Indeed, Gell’s theory highlights how the transformation brought about by the caribou miniature depends precisely on its emergence from, or rupture with, a relationship where it fits seamlessly into a narrative. This emergence causes the question of its agency to suddenly become apparent. The rupture, or disjuncture, that the caribou causes is significant because it does both at once – seem effective if unremarkable from any predecessors to its makers, and seem singular and entirely original to its viewer.

James Houston would go on to found cooperative ventures in Inuit communities, most notably the Cape Dorset printmaking cooperative in 1959 with government funding. This and other institutional interventions led to a centralized reshaping of Inuit art, not only at a commercial level, but also curatorially. Through continuous and intergenerational involvement with Inuit art, the Houston’s have introduced Inuit art to much larger networks, but have continued to shape artistic contributions to it. It is this intervention, beginning with the caribou sculpture, that distinguishes the contemporary from the historic period.

### **2.3 THE ART NEXUS**

“The basic thesis of this work,” Gell reminds the reader in *Art and Agency*, “is that works of art, images and icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of Anthropological theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency” (Gell, 1998, p. 96). He employs a unique set of terms in order to describe

situations in which objects function in an art-like way, revolving around an index, plotted in the *art nexus*. The art nexus is an analytic tool devised by Gell that allows the abducted agency of the index to be evaluated as it travels to or from different actors in an art-like situation. While the index is always essential to any art situation – as, for example, with Houston’s drawings and Naomialuk’s caribou miniature – it is not always, or necessarily, the focus of the other actors involved.

Without looking for meaning in the work, or attempting to “translate” its importance cross-culturally, the aim of the anthropologist in Gell’s view is to trace the agency in which a piece of art is involved. Crucially, he points out that the relational labels of agent, patient, artist, recipient, prototype and index can be, for analytical purposes, reassigned more than once within one “art-like situation,” or that one agent may be involved in more than one art-like situation. This is not for mere rhetorical reasons; because there might be more than one abduction or other transmission of agency among a set of actors, more lengthy functions are often necessary. Houston’s statement that the work occupies two different periods devised by art historians demonstrates that the work might be involved in more than one art-like situation. Marilyn Strathern observes that simultaneous, if not competing narratives – especially those addressing questions of identity – are focused on either pointing out the creation of “impure” hybrids in the process of division between subject and object, or the celebration of such hybrids that defy this classification (Strathern, 1996, p. 520). Actor network theory, as advanced by Bruno Latour, attempts to extend the concept to a “hybridization of tools for social analysis” by “setting up narrational fields in order to show how effects are produced out of alliances between human and non-human

entities” (Ibid). Strathern goes on to describe the implicit “fractal” and potentially limitless nature of this mode of analysis, and focuses in on places where it cannot penetrate, or where it does so with difficulty (Ibid, p. 523). The alinguistic and yet indisputable agency of the caribou might be one such place where a network can be arrested and grasped. Strathern thus also points to the limits of the networks, and, perhaps, the limits of agency.

Gell’s language (artists, index, prototype and recipient, all of which function either as an agent or patient in any given art-like situation to signify the directional flow of agency) is essential to his theory because the nature of these actors can only be described as situational. The terms do not arise from some need to be “fashionably difficult,” as one of his more severe critics has claimed (Bowdon, 2004). His terms are rather an attempt to counter theories that privilege symbolic meaning to broader cultural spheres over the specific efficacy of particular artworks. The Houston family’s particular emphasis on Naomialuk’s sculpture and its importance to different moments in conceptions of contemporary Canadian Inuit art demand a theory that is inherently relational. “The issue of agency is thus raised in a classificatory context, classifying all the entities in the world into those that ‘count’ as agents, and those that do not,” Gell says of the way agency is “usually discussed” (Gell, 1998, p. 21). He continues,

It is important to emphasize that I am not raising the question of agency in anything like this ‘classificatory’ sense. The concept of agency I employ is relational and context-dependant, not classificatory and context-free. Thus, to revert to the ‘car’ example; though I would spontaneously attribute ‘agency’ to my car if it broke down in the middle of the night, far from home, with me in it, I do not think my car has goals and intentions, as a vehicular agent, that are independent of the use that I and my family make of my car, with which it can co-operate or not. My car is a (potential) agent

with respect to me as a ‘patient’, not in respect to itself, as a car. It is an agent only in so far as I am a patient, and it is a ‘patient’ (the counterpoint of an agent) only in so far as I am an agent with respect to it. (Ibid, 22)

Analysis of an art object that functions as an actor in more than one situation is therefore possible without attributing to it any innate function as an actor. The role of the object is entirely dependent on the specific situation in which it is engaged, and can therefore change dependent on the situation being studied.

John Houston claims that Naomialuk’s piece not only occupies two different periods defined by art historians, but that it is the “last” produced in one and the “first” produced within the other. His classification implies, like his father did, that the sculpture has had a profound and transformative effect on Inuit art. It might also follow that it engages in different kinds of agency in each period, or perhaps takes part in a more complex and relational art-like situation. It might first be instructive, however, to discuss (using Gell’s terms) the basic exchange of agency that the Houstons describe taking place in Inukjuak in 1948. Most simply put, agency was abducted from the index (the agent, i.e., the sculpture itself) by James Houston (the patient). This type of relationship, written as a formula, appears as:

Index – A → Recipient – P

In the simplest of terms, Houston was somehow captivated by the agency of the index. Gell elaborates that “the concept of agency implies the overcoming of resistance, difficulty, inertia, etc. Art objects are characteristically “difficult”. They are difficult to make, difficult to “think”, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments” (Ibid, p. 23). The

process described here by Gell sounds uncannily like the astonishment, joy, confusion and captivation that James Houston experienced when he first laid eyes on Naomialuk's sculpture. He and his son often describe the sculpture's uniqueness, its ingenuity, and how he was "bowled over" by it. Although Graburn and Auger imply that others were collected during his visit, there is no reason to doubt this was the first, or that he didn't experience a similar sense of wonderment and excitement when he first saw the other pieces. For Gell, it is important that the artwork presents a kind of resistance to the person encountering it.

In the essay "How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion," Bruno Latour (1998) also discusses this quality regarding the "re-presenting" or person-making activity of art and, specifically, of religious iconography. This discussion elaborates on his study of mediators. For Latour, mediators engage in two different types of representing. In the first type, they stand in for an absence. This is the case when a map is used to represent actual terrain. In this type of representing, attention is turned away from the immediacy of the mediators and is focused on the idea of something preserved through each step of mediation. The relationship between mediators in this type of representing is therefore strictly hierarchical. In the second type of representing, the emphasis is on the activity of the mediators themselves, on their indicating, or, as Latour says, their function as an "index" (Latour, 1998). With their activity brought to the fore, the fact that what they indicate is an absence is made explicit. The problematization of representation, the resistance encountered in the attempt to identify what a mediator stands for – this impasse is what creates the

condition for the experience of presence, and of a person's presence in front of a mediator.

Similarly, when Houston encounters the caribou sculpture, he does not immediately categorize it as representative of a particular cultural order. And yet the caribou had existed in a previous relationship where it was understood as a cultural artifact. If the caribou is the last piece of the historical period and the first piece of the contemporary period, it does not simply bridge a gap. Rather, it participates in the creation of a new relationship when Houston looks at it as the artistic production of someone with whom he feels a common identity. He is forced to consider the immediacy of this index or mediator. The fact that he is an artist himself is important, as he is familiar with this focus on the immediacy of a situation rather than its place in an order.

Another particularity of the relationship between the index/agent and the recipient/patient is the potential for the art object to function as a mirror for the recipient. Houston's comments upon receiving the gift reveal a great deal about his personal taste and experience with art. He had been educated at the Ontario College of Art and Design under the direction of Lawren Harris, and other well-known Canadian artists who advocated painting the Canadian wilderness in a spare, modernist style. He was also very preoccupied with wildlife. On one of my visits to his house, John Houston showed me one of his father's sketchbooks that he kept during the war years when he served in the European theatre. On its pages, leering Nazis and noble allied officers jostle for space with leaping trout.<sup>2</sup> Initially jarring, upon reflection, the

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<sup>2</sup> This image is almost identical to a design he created for Steuben Glass decades later, as John points out in his film, *The Most Interesting Group of People You'll Ever Meet*.

sketchbook now seems to me to indicate just how much Houston associates nature with his home country, and how present this relationship was, even in starkly different circumstances. This is a different formalism than that of Naomialuk's sculpture, the spare lines and subject matter of which clearly appealed to Houston's personal taste and reflected many aspects of his education. James Houston's own biographical history and interest in nature was doubtlessly shared by other outsiders who visited the North. Northerners had by then created work for trade purposes with Southerners for many years. Houston's art background in particular, however, made a personal transferral of agency very strong in this instance. Gell uses the example of an Asmat shield to show how mimesis through situational and biographical inference can be a captivating quality of the index. He says:

Reconsider, for a moment, the Asmat shield, which terrifies the opposing warrior. It is surely noteworthy that these designs produce terror by making terror manifest – these designs seem to have been *composed* in a mood of terror, and we are terrified of them (or obliged to share in the emotion which they objectify)[...] The Asmat shield is a false mirror, which seems to show the victim his own terror, when in fact, it is another's – and in this way persuades him that he is terrified[...] the shield terrifies by persuading us that *we are what it shows*. (Gell, 1998 p. 31)

This might seem like a dramatic example, but this effect is, according to Gell, a persuasive instance of an Index – A → Recipient – P. “The same ‘false mirror’ effect is observable in myriad other contexts, and may, according to Benjamin (see Taussig, 1993; Benjamin, 1933), constitute the very secret of mimesis; that is, to perceive (to internalize) is to imitate, and thus we become (and produce) what we perceive” (Ibid).

An appropriate precision may be that we become what we perceive to have agency. Individuals identify with agency – even if they find themselves in opposition to it. An opposing agency is recognized as a force pushing against one's own will.



There is, therefore, an identity between this opposing will and one's own. And when an individual takes on and repeats the activity they have learned from another, it is because they see their own agency as being aligned with this activity. This is what happens, for example, when a warrior sees the Asmat shield and internalizes the fear. The image of fear does not fit into an ordered chain of mediators where it can be said to be representing the fear of an absent subject; rather, it stands separate as a symbol of fear itself and implicates the viewer.

The shocking familiarity of the warrior's shield is transferred to the opposing warrior because he understands the visceral fear of battle when he finds himself in the thick of it. Houston finally found himself in the North, a place that had long fascinated him, and by his son's account, he was overcome by excitement and joy – a sentiment he was trying to capture in his own drawings. In Naomialuk's sculpture, Houston saw the originality of his own vision of the North created by another artist, and the moment left him shocked and overwhelmed.

I do not mean to imply in this discussion that Naomialuk and Houston both share similar artistic backgrounds, or that they would have defined art in a similar manner at this moment, but rather that their preoccupations and ideas about art converge in such a way as to allow the creation of the "false mirror" that reflects Houston's own biographical and immediate experience. Naomialuk might not have known about Houston's background as a trained artist, but he surely understood that Houston was thrilled to be in the Arctic and valued the creation of figurative pieces that approximated the world around him.

Graburn (1983, cited in Auger, 2005) states that in this period, “most of the Inuit still lived a traditional camp style of life, modified to include winter fox-trapping and the use of imported guns.” Hunting and the animals that surrounded camp would have, by necessity, still been a part of daily life in the 1940s, even if quotidian practices were changing somewhat by then. Naomialuk’s sculpture was also certainly informed by the traditions of “souvenir” and has been used as a marker to characterize the late historic period, as it has been named. He undoubtedly created works that reflected not only his own traditions, but also characteristics that would have appealed to traders looking for souvenirs that were emblematic of the unfamiliar North. As noted already, relatively little is known about Naomialuk himself, but this does not diminish the continued strength of his creation. Naomialuk’s piece unites an arrangement of prototypes within a single object. The caribou itself was and is an important source of food and an essential part of Inuit cosmology. Naomialuk also undoubtedly recognized the tradition of souvenirs made for visitors to the North, which often depict animals and objects unusual to Southerners. Anthropologists have traditionally emphasized the separation between these two traditions, but such a distinction is unclear in this object. In any case, the sculpture had its intended effect: the captivation of its recipient.<sup>3</sup>

In order to captivate, an object must show something recognizable to the observer, but it must also, to some extent, confound. In the historic period, this aspect

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<sup>3</sup> The captivating elements of the sculpture set it apart from some of the more typical art objects studied by anthropologists. Gell (1998, p. 73) points out that “‘geometric’ (i.e. non-representational, or marginally representational) decorative designs” have been “a classical theme in the anthropology-of-art literature.” There is a legacy of pattern and decorative art in historic and prehistoric Inuit art, especially in tattoos and textiles, but the piece by Naomialuk does not employ any discernible pattern. In fact, given the breadth of “tribal” art that does employ patterns, the inclusion of Inuit art in anthropological discussion often dominated by analysis of patterns and decorations is of special note.

of Inuit art objects – including the caribou – was not so pronounced that it caused them to exist in rupture with stable systems of social knowledge, but when James is presented with the caribou, this confounding aspect comes to the fore. The object becomes difficult. The answer to the question of what it represents or points to becomes problematic. Gell's discussion of captivation (as well as Latour's discussion of re-presenting or person-making) points to a central quality that characterizes the art object – namely the ability to address the observer and implicate the observer's identity. When James experiences the agency of the caribou, when it provides an opposition to his ability to account for it, he feels an affinity with it. This is what brings him to look to Naomialuk as a kind of kindred spirit: the search for an agency in another which is corollary to his own.

### CHAPTER 3: THE AGENCY OF THE CARIBOU MINIATURE

The relationship described above (Index – A → Recipient – P) shows the way most artists would have intended their work to function in the historic period.

Naomialuk's work then instigates a new, but related set of relationships that become known as a whole as the contemporary period of Inuit art. James Houston is credited by a number of sources for promoting, funding and otherwise profoundly influencing the creation of contemporary Canadian Inuit art. In telling the story of how this happened, however, he repeatedly claims that this process began with Naomialuk's sculpture. I would posit that the emphasis placed by both James and John Houston on this sculpture represents, more broadly, the Index – A → Recipient – P relationship.

The gift to Houston from Naomialuk instigated a sweeping set of changes once Houston returned to the south. These changes were possible, however, only because of the involvement of an increasingly large number of actors – both people and art pieces (and later, finally, the stories themselves). Houston's role as recipient of the sculpture remains, but the sculpture then becomes part of his transformation into (among other roles) a patron. The specificity of the term does not quite account for the variety of work that James Houston accomplished in the 1940s and 50s, but it is nonetheless helpful in describing his effect on the art of the era.

Gell's simplest function for describing a patron reverses the position of Recipient and Index in his formula: Recipient – A → Index – P. One can immediately recognize some incongruities between this function and James Houston's experience. Gell's archetypal example of a patron is that of Louis XIV, walking through the

grounds of Versailles, “surveying the works he has commissioned and financed, regard[ing] himself as the author of the scene before his eyes” (Gell, 1998, p. 33). But the lavish spending and extravagant tastes of a monarch are hardly relevant to the art-like situation discussed here. Gell acknowledges that there are other, less evident ways in which a recipient exercises agency. He also suggests that the very act of spectatorship itself can be seen as an assertion of causal agency over the index. Gell elaborates:

One can hardly fail to take note that many members of the contemporary art public have actually internalized the view critics take of their agency as recipients of art, that is, they attribute creativity to themselves as spectators, who can make something out of raw material presented to them in the art gallery, in effect, Recipient-A → Index P. (Ibid, 34)

This discussion is particular to contemporary “high art,” but Gell has little difficulty in finding other cases in which a spectator/recipient can be made to feel like the agent of an index, as in the following instance:

A religious congregation, for instance, is entitled to think that their piety and devotion were contributory to the causation of the cathedral in which they worship, even though this cathedral was constructed centuries earlier, because they (not unreasonably) believe that the cathedral was created with them in mind, the future worshippers therein. (Ibid)

Gell does not mean to imply that an art recipient, or spectator, is arrogant enough to claim that the abducted agency of the artist was really their effort; he suggests, rather, that a strong work of art is so effective that the recipient cannot help but think that, at least in part, it was made for them. In the case of Naomialuk’s sculpture, that idea is certainly plausible, although impossible to verify. Regardless of the exact date of production, it is clear that it had precisely this impact on Houston. The description of Houston as Recipient – A still describes the moment he received the piece, and while it might describe some of his fascination with it and the foundations of his later work,

it is his work with different actors that would create the genre of contemporary Canadian Inuit art.

### **3.1 FROM THE ARCTIC TO JAPAN**

The efficacy of Naomialuk's sculpture as an influential catalyst can be determined not only in the biographical details of the Houstons themselves, but in those of the other pieces of art that continue to be a part of their daily lives. It is hard to escape the presence of a particular piece of art; above a mantle in a prominent place in his home hangs *The Enchanted Owl* by Kenojuak Ashevak, a well known artist of the contemporary period. An indisputably iconic piece, the image has perhaps circulated more widely than any other piece of Inuit art, appearing on a stamp in 1970 in celebration of the centenary of the Northwest Territories. Ashevak attained international fame for her artwork, meeting queens and dignitaries, and was made an Officer and later Companion of the Order of Canada. The international fame of the image and of the artist hinge upon an earlier network of international art exchanges that have only recently received major public attention. The creation of *The Enchanted Owl* and of contemporary Inuit stonecuts in general also rest not only on the work of the Houstons, but also on Naomialuk's sculpture. The particular *The Enchanted Owl* owned by John Houston is also emblematic of the efforts of the Houstons over the years to honour their family's involvement with Inuit art and with Inuit artists themselves.

James Houston had already begun instigating the creation of artist-run cooperatives in the Northwest Territories by the late 1950s, producing carvings for the

Southern Canadian market. In the late 1950s, however, as James Houston told it, a chance conversation with an artist significantly reshaped Canadian Inuit art. James Houston was spending a quiet evening with an artist named Osuitok when the artist made an offhand comment about a package of cigarettes:

Osuitok sat near me one evening casually studying the sailor head trademarks on two identical packages of cigarettes. He noted carefully every subtle detail of colour and form, then stated that it must have been tiresome for some artist to sit painting every one of the little heads on the packages with the exact sameness.

I tried to explain in Inuktitut, as best as I could, about “civilized” man’s technical progress in the field of printing little packages, which involved the entire offset colour printing process. My explanation was far from successful, partly because of my inability to find the right terms to describe words such as “intaglio” and “colour register,” and partly because I was beginning to wonder whether this would have any practical application in Inuit terms.

Looking around to find some way to demonstrate printing, I saw an Ivory walrus tusk that Osuitok had recently engraved. The carved tusk was about fifteen inches long. Osuitok had carefully smoothed and polished it and it had bold engravings on both sides. Into the lines of these engravings he had rubbed black soot gathered from his family’s seal oil lamp.

Taking an old tin of writing ink that had frozen and thawed many times, with my finger I dipped up the black residue and smothered it over the tusk. Then taking a thin piece of toilet tissue, I laid it on the inked surface and rubbed the top lightly, then quickly stripped the paper from the tusk. I saw that by mere good fortune, I had pulled a fairly good negative image of Osuitok’s incised design.

‘We could do that,’ he said... (Houston, 1995, p. 263)

Houston’s retelling of this event has a narrative similar to that of his first encounter with Naomialuk. In each case, a chance exchange leads to the production of a piece of art. In the instance of Naomialuk’s sculpture, Houston immediately seizes the potential of the piece, but in this instance a far larger network of actors eventually leads to the creation of *The Enchanted Owl*

Grasping another opportunity to help create more original and marketable indexes, Houston quickly realized that teaching sophisticated printmaking was, for the moment, beyond his abilities. He chose a spectacularly roundabout way of addressing this problem. In typically adventurous fashion, he decided to learn the craft in a country with a strong tradition of printmaking. He went to Japan. This choice struck me as a rather exotic and unpredictable one, but John Houston disagrees. He spoke about his father's time in Japan with characteristic enthusiasm, and thought it was an obvious place to learn the skills needed for printmaking, given its long traditions in the art. In any case, James Houston didn't consider his detour to Japan notable enough to mention in *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller* – an intriguing omission one can only speculate about today. There may be some clues, however, in Kierstead's *New Yorker* profile:

The first Prints, sent out to Stratford, Ontario, were fairly good, but Houston saw his deficiencies as a printmaker. He had accumulated a lot of leave, and in the autumn of 1958 he put in for it. 'I brought out a ton of my own drawings, had an exhibition in Ottawa, sold everything, and bought a plane ticket to Tokyo. I then consulted the Japanese Ambassador. I was told that when I got to Japan, after checking in with the Canadian Embassy I should go to the Japanese Cultural Society in Tokyo. So I did, and, about a million cups of tea later, they brought in a famous woodblock teacher, Unichi Hiratsuka, who was considered a national treasure.<sup>4</sup> Hiratsuka agreed to teach me six nights a week; his daughter did the interpreting. I lived with the man who later became the president of Waseda University; he had been a nobleman before the war. He has a wonderful wife and children, and I lived the Japanese way – little cold candied fish and rice for breakfast. They had a house in the country, too, and stacks of kimonos – every trapping – but the style was intellectual, not ducal. I had a documentary film with me that we had made about the Eskimos, but I'd been warned not to show it to the Japanese, lest they be offended by the implied comparison. I did show it at the Canadian Embassy, and there were two or three Japanese in the audience who loved it, and asked if I'd show it again, for some of their friends. The next hurdle was the Lord High Chief

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<sup>4</sup> Houston is referring to an official distinction, granted by the Japanese minister of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology.



of Protocol, then the Royal Princess, with her entourage, and, finally, the Emperor. Well, then, talk about friends!’

When Houston returned to Cape Dorset, six months later, he started a studio, and the Eskimos began to make prints. He had brought all kinds of Japanese Tools, made of soft steel, which is quick sharpening; the Eskimos soon discarded them in favour of file steel, sharpened and used like a chisel. ‘They swiftly converted the Japanese system to their own, Eskimo system, but this seemed no real big deal to them, really. The Eskimos are an inventive bunch. They could now do whatever they wanted.’ Houston now helped six or eight people, all men, although there are now women who make prints. He taught them printmaking and how to keep the paper clean. (Kierstead, 1988)

Here, Houston establishes a story with a cast of incredible-sounding characters, each sounding more important than the last, until eventually he meets the emperor of Japan. His time in Japan is interesting on its own as an account of a part of his life, but Houston doesn’t seem to want to incorporate it with the story of Inuit art. In Kierstead’s account, the discussion of Japan is contained, and not mentioned again either before or after. Immediately following this portion of his account according to Kierstead, he clearly emphasizes that Inuit artists adapted Japanese techniques and made them their own. His conception of Inuit artists creating pieces in the North meshes uneasily with the realm of Japanese printmaking – a tradition that only he learned directly. Moreover, in order to reconcile this seeming disjuncture, Houston must present printmaking as something that is first a hybrid of Japanese and Inuit art, and then a transformation of something Japanese into something Inuit. The moment at which it can be called both is brief, and it is then immediately replaced with something entirely Inuit. James Houston’s telling of the process requires the excision of the Japanese history in order to uphold the Inuitness of the art.

Bruno Latour's seminal work, *We Have Never Been Modern*, questions both the modern division of object and subject (specifically but not exclusively within the sciences) and post-modern critiques thereof, advocating instead for "a parliament of things" in which social constructions and other objects of interrogation should be viewed as constituent parts of larger networks connected with each other and even with the discourse surrounding them (academic and otherwise). This division between the object and subject, he argues, necessitates the creation of hybrids when objects of classification cannot neatly be put into one category (or sub-category). James Houston recognizes that his experience in Japan contributed something to printmaking and to Inuit art in general. He also wants to, correctly, honour the fact the work is indeed Inuit, but senses that overemphasizing constituent components that are clearly translocal and cultural might risk the position of the art as authentically Inuit. The different constituent components of contemporary Canadian Inuit art defy easy taxonomy, but none can be ignored.

For years, the role of Japan in the development of contemporary Canadian Inuit art was usually a footnote at best in popular accounts of Inuit art history. Recently, it has become more of a focus. A 2012 exhibition, *Inuit Prints, Japanese Inspiration*, attempts to redress this blind spot, assembling Japanese and Inuit prints along with some of James Houston's artwork. It continues to travel the country at the time of writing, and it was even shown at the Canadian embassy in Tokyo, where a member of the royal household with a particular interest in Canadian Inuit art and culture was given a guided tour. James Houston's widow, Mrs. Alice Houston, was also in attendance (GC press release). Houston's Japanese interlude is not a contained

event; his time there and the objects that exist in part because of it continue to circulate between Canada and Japan. Eschewing hybridity, the exhibition demonstrated how different constituent components work together without compromising each other to form the totality that is Inuit art.

It is not only to Japan that these artworks have returned in visiting earlier parts of the story of Inuit art. John Houston's print of *The Enchanted Owl* hangs in a prominent place in his home, looking over us during our interview. It is one of only 25 red *The Enchanted Owl* stonecut prints produced by Kenojuak Ashevak. According to John, part of its exceptional status came about almost by chance, because Kenojuak was unable to decide between red and green ink:

So here she is, and ... she doesn't know whether she'd like to have the tail in red or deep forest green ... and she's debating between the two, as my father tells the story ... and it's getting close to the time for the 1960 print collection and she hasn't made up her mind about the colour yet, so my father says, "you've got to decide." And she says, "oh no I don't ... I'm going to make half of them red and I'm going to make half of them green." (October 20, 2001)

The red print was later chosen for the stamp, and because only half of the usual number of prints was made with this colour, its value increased markedly. As of 2013, *The Enchanted Owl* had fetched up to \$26,000 at auction (artprice.com, Sept. 15). John Houston acquired his version in a particularly personal way. Naomialuk's sculpture was passed down to him from his father, but it was his mother who gave him his *The Enchanted Owl*. Houston says:

It has great personal meaning for me because my mother ... was a very powerful force in the development of Inuit art, and a very powerful force behind my development in my life, also. And she came for me and asked me to come into ... some room of the house, and there she had *The Enchanted Owl*, red tail, beautiful condition. And she said to me, "what do you think of that?" And I said, "what can I say?" I guess I thought about it then what I think about it now. And I said "it's so wonderful" and everything, and she said she wanted

to give it to me. And I was...I think I might have been about 12 years old. And I was kind of humbled by that – it made me quite emotional...and I said, “why would you want to do that? You don’t have to do that.” And she said, “I know,” and I said, “what have I done to deserve that?” And she said, “well, no, not really, it isn’t like that.” And she said, “I hope you will go on to do marvellous things that will be worthy of reward, and I’ll give it to you early.” It was a powerful, powerful thing. (October 20, 2001)

These many years later, of course, Houston still has his *The Enchanted Owl*. The work is a powerful force; not only does it remind him of his mother, it serves as an enforcer of his family’s place in the history of contemporary Canadian Inuit art – but more than that, it is an active force in shaping James Houston’s life. The piece has served as an inspiration for him to move forward in difficult times.

“Oh,” she said, “by the way, there’s one condition that goes with it: I wouldn’t be happy if you just sold it tomorrow and bought a motorcycle...” and I said to her, “no, no, no, it’s nothing like that. I will try to keep it my whole life, because if I am forced to part with it, that will signify failure.”

I’ve had a couple of moments – to try to be an independent filmmaker can have it ups and downs – and being a gallery owner can have its ups and downs ... there are moments when you kind of look around with kind of a stressed out eyeball and thinking, “what am I going to do?” Every once in a while my eye plays over *Enchanted Owl*, and I think, “no – no, my boy.”

Within the piece looking over us is the work of so many other constituent actors and moments that preceded it – Naomialuk’s sculpture, its being given to James Houston, his foundation of the cooperatives with Inuit artists, Japanese printmaking technique, and Alma Houston’s reminder to her son to be a success later in life. All of these are palpable as we talk.

Alfred Gell builds on Marilyn Strathern’s concept of fractal personhood in order to better describe a Polynesian sculpture called an A’a. This piece, displayed within the British museum, depicts a standing male figure seemingly sprouting smaller versions of itself. The piece, Gell suggests, “images both the notion of

personhood as the aggregate of external relations (the outcome of genealogy, fanning out in time and space) and at the same time the notion of an interior person...” (Gell, 1998, p. 139). Furthermore, Gell emphasizes that the strength of art pieces such as this one is to accentuate the concentric nature of personhood, comparing the piece to Russian nesting dolls, and referencing a description made by the title character in Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*: a likening of a person to an onion, which can be peeled away, layer by layer, until nothing is left. Gell states:

Ibsen’s idea, in utilizing this image is to show that there is no ultimate basis to Peer Gynt’s personhood; he is made of layers of biographical (relational) experience accreted together, for which none the less, he must take sole responsibility. Perhaps it is not such a vast step to pass from Peer Gynt trapped in the aporias of nineteenth-century materialism and individualism to the theological impulse which motivates the A’a, which depicts the divine creator, the mind of which the world is the body, in the form of a body composed of other bodies, ad infinitum. (Ibid, 140)

The strength of the A’a, in other words, is its layered nature:

What matters only is the reduplication of skins, outwards towards the macrocosm and inwards towards the microcosm, and the fact that all of these skins are structurally homologous; and there is no definitive “surface” and there is no definitive “inside”, but only a ceaseless passage in and out, and that it is here, in this traffic to and fro, that the mystery of animation is solved. (Ibid, 141)

Houston’s story of Naomialuk’s sculpture functions in much the same way, wrapping layers of his own family’s history and the story of his life around the piece in order to cement them together. The layers, far from obfuscating the point of origin (the sculpture), accentuate the scale and breadth of its impact by tracing a journey through the past and among different actors. Through the course of my interviews with Houston, I became aware of yet another layer to the story. Houston has filled his Halifax home with significant works of art, including some early Cape Dorset prints,

and some of his own artwork. When I visited, *The Enchanted Owl* jostled for space with drawings made by his young son, named Dorset, hinting at the transmission of these traditions into the future. Significance of houses is not lost on Alfred Gell, as he states: “Houses are bodies because they have armored shells, because they have gaudy, mesmerizing skins, which beguile and terrify; and because they have organs of sense and expression – eyes which peer out through windows and spy-holes, voices which reverberate through the night. To enter a house is to enter a mind, a sensibility” (Gell, 1998, p. 253). Houston’s house, which perhaps coincidentally has an elaborate second-empire-style facade, is animated not only by reminders of the past, but with the promise of traditions that continue into the future. Somewhere inside, safely hidden away, is Naomialuk’s sculpture.

### **3.2 BIOGRAPHY, NARRATIVE AND THE ART OF ANNIE POOTOOGOOK**

Given the breadth of actors involved in contemporary Canadian Inuit art, it can hardly be assumed that John Houston could be the only one among them who attempts to honour tradition through biographical narrative. Many members of the first generation of contemporary artists have died in the past decades. Kenojuak Ashevak died earlier this year, having cemented her position as one of the country’s most respected artists.

A younger generation of artists has begun to make work that appears to be both formally and substantively different from the work of older generations. In 2006, Annie Pootoogook was awarded the prestigious Sobey Art Award, which comes with

\$50,000. Typical Inuit art over the decade focused primarily on spiritual themes, or on traditional subjects such as hunting, but Pootoogook typically depicts radically contemporary subjects through prints and drawings. Men watching pornography, domestic assault, and substance abuse all make their way into her works. Many have a strong narrative quality, with figures arranged in tableau-like scenes, evoking daily life in the contemporary North. Others have a simpler composition, like *Bra* (2006), a clear drawing of a red bra on a plain white background, its back open. They are unquestionably original and individual contributions to the genre. The bra is shocking in its familiarity. It broadens the concept of contemporary Inuit art by demonstrating the fluidity of the boundary between North and South. Surely Pootoogook was aware of the surprise that the work invokes in the viewer, and that the bra wouldn't immediately be recognized as traditional by buyers or, perhaps, by some Inuit. While nudity and sexuality were not uncommon themes in Inuit pieces by the time it was made, they were generally part of legend; the bra is mundane, alone, away from any body. Pootoogook anticipates the shock of the viewer – and their reflection on that shock. Like Gell's Asmat shield, Pootoogook's bra anticipates the reaction of the viewer, and its two bright red cups stare back at them, as if to embody that surprise (Gell, 1998, p. 31).

Annie Pootoogook comes from a long line of artists. Her grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona, was a prolific painter, printmaker and maker of drawings. Among the earliest artists to work with James Houston, she eventually became a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and a Member of the Order of Canada. A visual and biographical work she produced was also made into a National Film Board of

Canada animated documentary. After her death, her likeness appeared on a 43 cent stamp. Annie Pootoogook's mother, Napachie Pootoogook, made drawings depicting daily life in the North that included aerial antennae and discarded oil drums – an inclusion that could be perceived as the beginnings of some of her daughter's less than idealized images of the North. While Pootoogook's work does shock when juxtaposed with that of earlier generations, and her red bra indexes undeniably contemporary prototypes, her work is still firmly within the tradition of Inuit art, a tradition that her family helped found and has maintained inter-generationally.

Some of Annie Pootoogook's pieces in particular demonstrate her commitment to the tradition of Inuit art and its importance to her family. A recurring theme in Pootoogook's work is the pair of glasses worn by her grandmother. There still exist today many images of Pitseolak Ashoona gazing at her paper through thick, horn-rimmed glasses. One of Pootoogook's drawings, *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser*, encapsulates Gell's concept of indexicality. The viewer is shown all of the items named in the title on an empty table and, in viewing the items present, is made acutely aware of other actors present somewhere else – a different time, a different place. We are made to feel Pitseolak Ashoona's absence through the image of her effects – those which facilitated her art-making, but which are of no great use without her. The work is intimate and sombrely elegiac. Another of her pieces strengthens the intergenerational narrative further. In *Drawing My Grandmother's Glasses*, Pitseolak Ashoona's absence is still implicit, but there is inferred action as well in the depiction of a hand holding a pencil in the act of creation. Her grandmother is gone, but Annie Pootoogook has taken up the tradition.



Pootoogook's picture demonstrates the limits of agency that can be transferred, or "abducted," in art-like situations. Gell ruminates on this problem in a discussion of the work of Marcel Duchamp, an example he characterizes as "cheating" because it is itself preoccupied with the limits of artistic ability, but which illustrates his point rather well. Duchamp sought, especially in his later practice, to show through his art that which he termed "the fourth dimension" – "essentially the 'real' strictly *unrepresentable* domain beyond" (Gell, 1998, p. 242). He was associated with the cubists, who proposed simultaneous and multiple perspectives as a means for achieving this fourth dimension, but "Duchamp was more ambitious; he still wanted to represent the unrepresentable 'flux' of being (to employ the Heideggerian term) but without simply reducing the multiplicity and fullness of experience to a series of partial snapshots" (Ibid, 244). Gell cites Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages* as an example of the limits of an index to achieve this goal. The work is a palimpsest composed of three layers: on top is a series of lines resembling a rail network – a map of some kind – radiating outwards from a point. Below it, one can see a preliminary sketch for a future piece, *The Large Glass*. Beneath everything is a version of an earlier figurative and symbolist work. Gell states:

The network looks like a 'map' because it is part of a 'map' of time. But this can only be a four-dimensional map. Like Bergson, Duchamp downplays the 'merely' visible, or its illusionistic representation. Like Bergson, he distrusts the our perception 'which is merely analytic and synthetic, and seeks instead the 'current of creative energy' (i.e. *durée*, or Heideggerian 'being') which 'gushes forth through matter.' This is the fourth dimension. (Ibid, 251)

The final, layered piece, Gell suggests, "allows us to see his 'sinking' past as a transformable component of the present, retained as something already superseded in the course of his intervening life" (Ibid, 251).

I propose that Annie Pootoogook's *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser* and *Drawing My Grandmother's Glasses* function in much the same way as Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages*. Pootoogook indexes not only in the act of drawing but of drawing her family's history of doing so, of their absence and the continued effect of their artistic interventions. Through the act of drawing, and especially through her drawing of herself, she establishes her agency over the constituent elements of her past. "Each Duchamp work [...] invites us to adopt a particular perspective on all Duchamp's work," Gell argues. Likewise, Pootoogook's revisiting her grandmother's glasses demonstrates not just a perspective, but a reordering that seeks to include her in both the past and the present of contemporary Canadian Inuit art.

Sadly, Annie Pootoogook has found herself the subject of such headlines. By 2012, the *Globe and Mail* reported that Pootoogook was living on the streets of Ottawa and selling her work for a fraction of the gallery prices they commanded at the height of her career (*Globe and Mail*, Aug. 15, 2012). Her situation, the *Globe* points out, "could easily find itself depicted in a Pootoogook drawing or series of drawings." By then, she was selling her work for \$25, instead of the \$2,000 to \$2,500 that it had fetched in a prominent Toronto gallery not long before. Later that year, it was reported that Pootoogook had given birth to a daughter prematurely in an Ottawa shelter, while her partner was in prison. Shortly after, however, they had found accommodation, and she began to sell her work at higher prices (*Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 29, 2013). Despite the sad details of these reports, Pootoogook sounded remarkably cheerful and optimistic, and she continues to sell her work privately.

It is her images of hunting, however, that unite these often competing prototypes and trajectories, and point to the strength her work. Traditional hunting scenes have been an essential part of Inuit art since 1948. The earlier discussion on miniature sculpture in the prehistoric period identifies the diverse possible purposes of the earliest known art forms in the North. Laugrand and Oosten point toward the shamanic possibilities of the pieces for use in the hunt. Auger suggests that they may have been toys (which Gell suggests are not trivial, but socially significant and powerful actors in certain situations). In any case, carving traditions from the prehistoric to the historic period demonstrate a thematic continuity until the creation of Naomialuk's caribou. Hunters wielding harpoons and attacking whales or walruses are commonplace in twentieth-century prints and sculpture. The traditional way of life depicted in these works not only reflects quotidian life in the North in the mid-twentieth century, but also southern images thereof. In the time that Annie Pootoogook is working as an artist, however, traditional life in the North is (as always) changing. Pootoogook also depicts the hunt, which remains an essential part of life in the North. Her work *Family Gathering Whale Meat* shows a surprisingly graphic image of a traditional practice that might seem shocking to some from the south. *Family Gathering Whale Meat* might seem to be very different from both her piece *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser* and from her scenes of domestic violence, but I suggest that this work employs many similar devices to draw from the past, situate the artist in it, and then point firmly to the future. In *Family Gathering Whale Meat*, the history of Inuit life in the North, and also the history of Inuit art depicting hunting are both clear prototypes for the piece. In it, Pootoogook captures the power of the

continuity of tradition. We have also demonstrated that the roots of graphic art on paper lie in the long-term involvement of the Houston family with generations of Inuit artists and their traditions, and in choosing this very medium, Pootoogook acknowledges the contribution that her family has made to the medium's history.

Pootoogook's piece is not merely a gentle and touching homage to tradition and prototypes; it proudly shows its newness and originality in the same way that her bra does. The whale is not an unrecognizable butchered mass, or a whole dead animal being slowly taken apart – it is simply missing its entire front half. *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser* and *Drawing My Grandmother's Glasses* employ a similar technique, but for very different purposes. Where the other works use one image to point to the absence of another – to express both longing and respect – here, Pootoogook uses the missing half of the whale to shock the viewer, perhaps contrasting their existing conceptions of the traditional hunt. The scene is in its own way violent, but not particularly gory – the family is smiling as they collect the meat. The scene is one of economic sustenance. In this sense, the piece fits firmly within her oeuvre – her images of her family's tools (glasses, erasers, pencil) are also tools that her family has used to earn a living for generations. *Family Gathering Whale Meat* might shock, even proudly, but it only does so because of its deep commitment to traditions in hunting and in art. Pootoogook's *Family Gathering Whale Meat* evinces her current synthesis of different and seemingly diverse indexical practice in Inuit art today. The hunt is the foremost obvious prototype for the piece, but it also contains the contribution of different strands and different eras in Inuit art.

Pootoogook's work shows how perceptions of the North are also changing within southern Canada. Domestic violence is not confined to Pootoogook's painting – the soaring crime rate in Nunavut is making headlines just as Pootoogook's career reaches new heights (*Macleans*, 2010; CBC, Oct. 14, 2010; *Globe and Mail*, April 2011). Pootoogook's work makes ample room for crime, abuse, and addiction, but always with an eye on traditional prototypes within the corpus of Inuit art.

Pootoogook's work sidesteps question of cross-cultural translation and representation by remaining highly traditional while carefully allowing space for biographical images that give a more complete picture of the contemporary North. Her work is not an attempt to bridge a gap between two cultures, or to translate meaning from one to another; they are biographical works that integrate different narratives and prototypes. Recently, they have resonated in an uncommonly strong way in the south. The scale of networks that allow specific crimes, images of poverty, and statistics on crime to enter popular media have given a broader immediacy to Pootoogook's work, but they do not indicate that her work is a radical departure.

Pootoogook's recent personal difficulties, and the intensely autobiographical, even ancestral nature of her work, demonstrate not only the power of artistic agency, but of the process of abduction itself. Pootoogook's work circulates around the world, and indeed her artistic achievements have brought her international acclaim, while she has continued to struggle. Even amid this recent turmoil, Pootoogook has nonetheless continued to produce art. It might be tempting to attribute her difficulties to instabilities brought about by her success in the south, but her frank depictions of abuse in the North point to a dark past, too. The violence in her images of daily life

seem to contrast with her touching pieces on the artistic women in her life and with her frank but playful treatment of sex.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

### 4.1 THEORETICAL APPROACH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO ART IN ANTHROPOLOGY

In this thesis I have presented an analysis based on the theoretical framework proposed by Gell. He suggests that art should be considered as objects capable of interaction and agency in relation to the people with whom they are directly connected, and as part of the networks of which they are integral parts. While Gell's focus is on biographical analysis it can be applied to broader networks provided that the focus remains on specific pieces of art. Gell proposes that a narrow base (consisting of just a few interacting entities) is a more informative platform for analysis than a generalized, widely encompassing conceptual or representational canvas. He proposes that one can move incrementally outward from the initially analyzed interactions to perceive the broader effects of pieces of "art." Gell's approach is more directly connected to the artwork than earlier theories of art in anthropology, and also to the viewer him/herself, and the fascination invoked by the piece of art – which may bring with it a sense of surprise, of opposition, of resistance. In recognizing and coming to terms with the opposition, the viewer can acquire a sense of affinity with the piece of art. A central concept promoted by Latour's approach is the ability of an object (not limited to artwork) to point to something absent, to stand for something other than the object, something more – which can include intricate social relationships that are not immediately present or obvious.

These theories stand in stark contrast to those based on aesthetic systems, or on

attempts to interpret the distinctiveness of indigenous ways of seeing. Prior to the 1990s, anthropological approaches to art focused on representation or the use of art as translation between cultures. As anthropology emerged from mainly a museum-based enterprise into an academic discipline with ethnography as the core of the approach, the formal analysis of art remained mainly in the domain of conventional interpretations, even as other areas began to expand. However, in displaying “primitive” art and other ethnographic objects in a museum setting, clashes arose between those presenting the work in contexts concerned with aesthetics and those presenting the objects in the culture that produced them. Thus, the need for a profoundly different approach to the analysis of art in an anthropological context became apparent to some in the field, and it is Gell’s theories and concepts that are associated most strongly with this change.

Central to his theory is the concept of “abduction of agency”: a change initiated by the artwork takes place when its imbued intentionality mediates social relationships. Gell’s theory permitted a move away from anthropological approaches to art that were mired in concepts more properly in the realm of art history – such as representation and aesthetics. With his introduction of these concepts, he devised a new vocabulary and mode of expression, which can be envisioned as a formula for understanding the application of his theory, represented as:

Index – A → Recipient – P

In this case, “A” stands for the artist and “P” for the patient, and the arrow itself for the transfer of agency. The formula emphasizes the role of art in revealing social relationships – the realm of the anthropological – rather than its role in aesthetics – the realm of art history. Viewed in this way, the objective becomes to proceed in steps in



order to reach an understanding from the small biographical context, all the while uncovering social relationships.

Gell's approach has been applied to indigenous art in analyses by Schneider, who considered the appropriation of motifs by urban art dealers in Argentina; and by Graburn in a retelling of the story of Inuit art's emergence into the contemporary realm. Graburn generalizes Gell's approach, being concerned with the symbolic significance of a narrative rather than specific agency of the art pieces. He refers back to Glass, who discussed the concept of the movement of objects as standing for the story of a people. This stands in contradiction to Gell's own insistence that the *index* is itself required, that there can be no abduction of agency without it, thus making generalizations where narratives can stand in for the index outside of his intended application. Gell's language (artists, index, prototype, and recipient, all of which function either as an agent or patient in any given art-like situation to signify the directional flow of agency) arises in part to encapsulate the specific efficacy of particular artworks, to position the analysis in a particular situation, which is counter to the concept of symbolic meaning in a broader cultural sphere.

Understanding the term "abduction of agency" requires awareness of a change that takes place in an "actor" as a result of an interaction. Once the change occurs, the effect presupposes "social agency" housed in the "index", the artwork under consideration; this inference is an explanation of the observed effect, the cause that brought about the change, and can continue to be transferred to other actors. The effect is often intimate; this is at the base of Gell's insistence that "art is best studied on a small, biographical scale" (Gell, 1998). These considerations make the story of the Houstons and their

relationships – on the one hand to the small caribou statue, and on the other hand to the shaping of contemporary Inuit art traditions – well suited to exploring the possibilities of Gell’s approach. The abduction of agency facilitated by the Caribou was of such strength, that its prototypical influence can be traced in numerous subsequent art-like situations. These situations are at the core of the Contemporary Period.

#### **4.2 JAMES HOUSTON’S LIFE AS VIEWED THROUGH GELL’S THEORETICAL LENS**

James Houston was already deeply involved in art production, having studied art in Toronto. But the “art nexus” within which he became a “patient,” imbued with the agency within the little caribou carving, set his life trajectory on its particular and well-known path. Among the crucial elements that came together in the gifting of the caribou, the self-definition of both men, Houston and Naomialuk, as artists in their own previously unconnected social spheres is perhaps paramount. Houston saw not an ornament or souvenir – something that other, non-artist recipients might have seen – but the *potential* of which his fellow artists, the Inuit artists, were capable. And so the dual role of the little caribou – as the last of the historic period and the first of the contemporary period – erupted from the moment. And Houston’s life as a central figure in the creation, promotion, and circulation of Inuit art began. The index’s potential to function as a mirror of the recipient also comes into play here, as Houston’s personal taste and experience with art, his predilection for a spare, modernist style and wilderness subjects, made him favourably predisposed toward the little caribou and its graceful lines.

The sweeping set of changes instigated by the exchange that took place once Houston returned to the south was possible only because of the large number of actors –

both people and art pieces, and later stories about these – who became involved. It is at this stage that Houston can be considered as a patron in the sense described by Gell in the reverse of his formula: Recipient – A → Index – P. At this time, his work with different artists created the genre of contemporary Canadian Inuit art, intimately connected with artist-run cooperatives in the Northwest Territories by the late 1950s. These were primarily concerned with producing carvings for the southern Canadian market.

The stage was now set for a second major “art-like situation” to reshape Canadian Inuit art. Here, Gell’s insistence that “art” not be limited to a set definition – that objects not normally thought of as art can function as agents in a manner similar to that of art – becomes essential in the analysis. In establishing this point, Gell brought up toys, specifically dolls, and considered them as archetypal examples of the subject matter of the anthropology of art.

This second “art-like situation” is the one described by James Houston that took place in the late 1950s, when the Inuit artist Osuitok remarked on the difficulty and monotony for an artist to reproduce time after time the sailor head trademark on identical packages of cigarettes. In the formulaic representation of Gell, Osuitok is the patient observing the index and assuming an artist at work. Thus was born the realization by James Houston that printmaking was absent in the North. He found his words for explanation limited and so resorted to a crude demonstration of the process, using an ivory walrus tusk that Osuitok himself had engraved, black soot from a nearby seal oil lamp, and ink. From the tusk he was able to remove an image of the incised design onto a piece of toilet tissue, which provoked the statement by Osuitok, upon seeing the process, “We could do that.” The timing of this statement by Osuitok, an Inuit artist, is important

in a consideration of the development of the process and the convoluted path required for this technical ability to become available to artists in the North.

Houston's personal involvement – going to Japan, learning the process himself, and returning with tools to supply a studio for training six months later – sharply underscores his sense of commitment to the newly emerging contemporary Inuit art era. His own life took an abrupt turn because of the “art-like situation” and subsequent abduction of agency present in the mundane – to Western eyes – trademark design on a cigarette package.

The Japanese era of James Houston's life is part of his own life story, and yet there is a sense that he may have downplayed it, perhaps not wishing his personal involvement to overshadow what was to come after the artists of the North learned the process and changed it, making of it something uniquely Inuit. The moment in which Inuit printmaking was intimately involved with Japanese techniques and traditions was brief; it was immediately replaced by something entirely Inuit. Osuitok's own observation, long before the arrival of the technical skills and materials in the North, that printmaking was something “we” could do, and his own first impression of the process based on an engraving made by his own hand, uphold the concept that printmaking was palpably absent – in the sense of Latour's analytical stance, it was a part of the Inuit art world that was implied by much that was already there; only its emergence was needed. Here the “artist” – a combination of Osuitok and Houston, as Osuitok's engraving was used to produce the soot-and-ink negative on the piece of toilet tissue – an index, and the abduction of agency coming from that print were able to propel Houston on his quest in Japan.

Gell asserts that the aim of the anthropologist is to trace the agency in which a piece of art is involved. As we follow the arc of interactions initiated by the gift of the small caribou to James Houston, an inescapable observation is that emergent properties stem from these interactions; and then they themselves become part of an “art-like situation,” initiating yet another abduction of agency that ultimately resulted in creation of the genre of contemporary Inuit Canadian art.

Using Gell’s insistence on specific pieces of art and their relationships with people, the thesis describes Annie Pootoogook’s *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser*, and *Drawing my Grandmother’s Glasses* among other works, as the indices at the center of biographical networks, where her grandmother and her artworks serve as the prototype. The resonance between the Houston family’s connections to Inuit art, and Pootoogook’s contributions to it, despite clear differences between the two, demonstrate the dexterity of Gell’s approach to artwork.

#### **4.3 INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFERS OF AGENCY, AND JOHN HOUSTON’S LIFE**

Subsequent to his meeting with Naomialuk, James Houston moved with Alma Bardon Houston, his new wife, to Cape Dorset in 1950, where they lived for the next decade and where their two sons (John and Sam) were born. Thus was begun the intergenerational effect of the interaction between James Houston and the little caribou. John Houston grew up imbued with an understanding of the role of the little caribou in his life and has often retold and interpreted that story, of which he says “the story of how this happened is the story of my family.” The decade in which they actually lived with the people of Cape Dorset saw the beginning of printmaking, the beginning of the Art

Co-operatives, and the beginning of John's lifelong involvement with the culture and art of the North. Unlike his father, John's mother Alma was not an artist in her own right, but was an integral part of the unfolding of the new genre of art through her advocacy, her organizational skills, and her serving as spokesperson for the artists – not only with the outside world, but also occasionally in helping bring James's attention to an artist. She and John together continued to represent artists and to make the art of the North available and promoted throughout the world for several decades. These endeavours, in a time and place where continuing to tell the story of the birth of contemporary Northern art was a constant necessity, can be seen as a continuation of the agency of the little caribou, and they show the power of narrative that has been demonstrated by Julie Cruikshank (1998). Cruikshank builds on observations made by James Clifford at the Portland Museum of Art in the 1980s, where objects are seen as memory aids for the telling of elaborate stories. In her analyses, the stories can be traditional, but can also become implicated in contemporary issues. Her concepts of narrative interacting with art resonate well with Gell's assertion that art is best studied on a small, biographical scale. With the Houstons, we see the little caribou as a central agent in the retelling of the contemporary origin story as the narrative moves from the North to the south of Canada and beyond.

The intended function of the miniatures that are known to have been made by Inuit people for hundreds of years (the oldest of which come from the Thule culture) is a matter of speculation and debate, but seen through the lens of Gell's interpretation, a precise categorization is unnecessary. A single object can function in multiple ways; they may have served as toys, but that doesn't contradict the possibility that their material was selected with concepts of taboo and mythological association at the outset. This

functional ambiguity reconfirms the potency of Gell's position that a single object be viewed through its relational interactions; it can serve as an agent of varying transformative power depending on the particular art nexus of which it is an integral part. A familial bond is often formed with these objects, a connection that is present and emphasized by John Houston in his work; a connection that would accompany an object central to other narratives as a memory aid over the span of generations, as detailed by Cruikshank. And as the familial connection extends, a single piece can have intergenerational and instructive significance, just as the little caribou has for the Houston family.

The lives of James and John Houston have remarkable parallels to those of Geoff Bardon, an art teacher who worked in the Australian aboriginal settlement of Papunya and is considered responsible for the development of the Western Desert Painting Movement, and his son James. Bardon was responsible for encouraging adult aboriginal artists to produce works normally done as body decoration, cave painting, and sand stories in more durable acrylic on Masonite and canvas board, which could then be sold; he was instrumental in establishing art cooperatives; in addition, he worked on a book with his son James about the origins of contemporary Australian aboriginal painting. Here we see another example of the possibility for the abduction of agency to span generational timeframes.

Kenojuak Ashevak, the celebrated Inuit printmaker, was one of James and Alma Houston's early protégés. She expressed herself in many different art forms – drawing, sculpting, printmaking, and even in designing stained glass. Several Canadian stamps bear her images; the first was done from *The Enchanted Owl* in 1970, only ten years after

its completion. In that short time it had become a recognized representative of the newly emerging contemporary Inuit art genre. A rare print of this piece was gifted to John Houston by his mother and still occupies a position of prominence in his home. The print resonates with the agency of so many other constituent actors – both people and objects; Naomialuk’s sculpture as a gift to James Houston, the cooperatives, Japanese printmaking techniques, and Alma’s reminder to her son. And so here again, embodied in another piece of art, the intergenerational connections are apparent. And yet another reminder of the intergenerational significance of the initial gift: John’s son, whose name is Dorset, makes drawings that share space with *The Enchanted Owl* on the walls of the Houston household.

#### **4.4 THE INUIT ART WORLD OF TODAY AS ENCAPSULATED BY PITSEOLAK ASHOONA AND HER DESCENDANTS**

In the more than half century since the transformation of traditional Inuit art into the contemporary Inuit art of today, many artists have flourished and many have shared intergenerational connections with their offspring. A prominent family among these is that of Pitseolak Ashoona, a celebrated artist, and several of her children and grandchildren who have become artists. Pitseolak Ashoona was one of the earliest artists to work with James Houston, and she eventually became a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and a Member of the Order of Canada, reflecting her success as an artist. Her art depicts the essence of quotidian life in the North before the radical increase of government economic and political intervention in the postwar years. Her daughter Napachie Pootoogook makes drawings that depict daily life in the North, and



include aerial antennae and discarded oil drums – items that would not have been in Pitseolak Ashoona’s representations, but are now a part of the fabric of daily life. These two artists are the generational artistic inheritance that has come to Annie Pootoogook, a granddaughter of Pitseolak Ashoona and a celebrated artist recognized as one of the younger generation beginning to make work that is both formally and substantively different from the work of the older generations, as discussed in chapter three. She has drifted from, but not abandoned, spiritual themes and many traditional subjects (though not hunting), and includes in her work such titillating images of domestic assault, substance abuse and men watching pornography. Ultimately, however, it is their common commitment to depicting daily life in the North that is most striking, not the differences in their subject matter.

Pootoogook’s work is also tied by very direct links, through her generational inheritance, to the little caribou and the early days of Houston’s first impact on the art of the North. In looking at her art through the analytical framework of Gell and Latour, the initial distancing and shock of some of the images – *Bra* can be starkly evoked here – engage the viewer by provoking resistance on first encountering the work. Also central to much of her work, in a manner that lends itself to interpretation through Latour’s theoretical construction, is the invocation of the absent – as in the simple but evocative *Glasses, Pen, Pencil and Eraser*. In viewing the titular items, all shown on an empty table, one becomes acutely aware of Pitseolak Ashoona’s absence, these simple items so closely connected to her art-making but no longer of use without her. The intergenerational narrative is strengthened further by *Drawing My Grandmother’s Glasses*, where Pitseolak Ashoona’s absence is still implicit but we are left aware that

Annie Pootoogook has taken up the tradition. Pootoogook indexes not only in the act of drawing herself, but of drawing her family's history of doing so, thus evoking their continued artistic intervention even in their absence. And she doesn't leave the traditional themes of her family's work behind: they appear in her work, yet again in a starkly realistic manner, such as her depiction of hunting in *Family Gathering Whale Meat*. She has redefined the meaning of contemporary Canadian Inuit art by depicting a broader, and often less palatable, side of daily life in the North. The work is powerful because it shows that both the idealized past and contemporary concerns can exist in the same space.

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