

Northern Haze

Candice Hopkins, Guest Contributor

As I begin to write this introduction, I am sitting on a plane en route from Yellowknife to Vancouver, having just travelled through Nunavut, visiting the communities of Iqaluit, Cape Dorset, Baker Lake and Arviat with brief station stops in Rankin Inlet, Whale Cove and Coral Harbour. Despite growing up in the North this was my first time to Nunavut and Yellowknife; my childhood spent in the Yukon and British Columbia's Peace River region always kept me below the tree line. I realize that I have only begun to understand the true scope of the North after experiencing more of these lands first-hand and not mediated through the lens of a camera or by the stories of others; when I felt my eyelashes freeze instantly in the deep chill of -53° , and gained more awareness of the complex histories and distinct realities in this region. Admittedly, just the word "North" lends itself to fuzzy generalizations in the face of the diversity and deep histories of these lands. I was struck with how my experiences in these lands oscillated between intimacy and distance, and both at their extreme. Intimacy and distance are perhaps apt metaphors in which to consider many of the artworks in *BLIZZARD*; at their most generative, these two words encompass ideas of geography, social and cultural relationships, and personal experiences, as well as engagements with art. They are also something of a strategy—a means of destabilizing easy assumptions about this region to open the way for new understandings.

When I first encountered Nicholas Galanin's *Polar Bear Welcome Mat*, I couldn't resist the urge to run my fingers through the surprisingly soft polar bear fur and graze my fingertips along the thick otter-pelt letters spelling out the word "welcome." As an object it was both inviting and repellent: the very moment I felt the desire to feel the brush of fur against my skin, to wrap myself in the warmth of the hide, the very idea of using the precious hide as a surface to wipe my dirty feet seemed sacrilegious. Galanin's welcome mat embodied the contradictions of the north. The polar bear is both a vital part of local economies through sustainable hunting practices and customs, and now, a poster child for climate

change.¹ I experienced a similar push and pull while watching Geronimo Inutiq's two videos. The first, which was particularly mesmerizing, included sampled beats, songs, and voice-over narrative combined with images of historical documents such as maps, all of which were overlaid with shifting abstract images of startlingly bright colour. In this moment I saw the history of a place and its contemporary reality in a startling new form. The second video consisted of a steady shot of the horizon line visible just beyond a series of what looked like standard government-issued row houses (very much the same as those found in urban centres farther south). The video placed the modernization of Nunavut front and centre, but in the distance the land held its familiar pull. These two works made clear the extent to which the divide between “North” and “South” is a manufactured one and is becoming all the more porous with time.

Another video also played in the gallery's back room during *BLIZZARD*. Directed by Derek Aqqiaruq, it documented members of the popular rock/metal band Northern Haze as they recounted their experiences as Inuk musicians. It was a revelation. Being based far from a large urban centre didn't impede the band. They achieved fame and notoriety in Igloolik and in the South where they played to rapt audiences at Expo 86 and other festivals. I imagine that for many who witnessed their shows, it was their first time hearing song lyrics entirely in Inuktitut! The documentary is a story of the ingenuity inherent to the North (when first faced with a lack of instruments, what the band couldn't borrow, they crafted by hand) as well as the ability of popular music to provide a basis for cultural translation.

Jamasie Pitseolak's sculptures share this idea of cultural translation. The artist playfully engages with the peculiarities of the English language from the perspective of someone whose mother tongue is Inuktitut. Among his many sculptural word plays is a piece dating from 2008 that consists of a carved hand mounted upright on a base; balanced in its palm is a stone eyeball complete with an iris crafted from inlaid caribou antler. The title, *Hand Eye Coordination*.² Curator Christine Lalonde suggests that, for Pitseolak, “focusing on English ... is a way to poke at the insurgence of popular culture in the North as well as comment on the long history of miscommunication that has occurred between non-Inuit and Inuit.”³ His diminutive and finely-crafted sculptures are also familiar. They not only challenge common assumptions regarding Inuit sculpture—electric

guitars and ping-pong tables being less than typical subject matter—they also address the perceived disparity between Arctic life and popular culture. His sculptures regularly reproduce commercially manufactured items, and they do so by hand. What is not always apparent is that they are often informed by personal events. *Ping Pong Table*, for example, emerged from surprise moment, a game between Pitseolak and a friend where the “ball kept going and going” as though their amateur abilities were suddenly replaced with professional skills.⁴

Tanya Lukin Linklater's installation, *Eskimo Kissing Booth*, makes reference to a personal custom in her home community: puvipsuk, where friends and close family members press their lips and noses together in a form of greeting and affection. A misrepresented and misunderstood Northern tradition, it is also the subject of ignorant stereotypes in Southern media: on Wikipedia, the photograph illustrating the custom features the smiling faces of a Caucasian man and woman as they press their noses together. The image only serves to further perpetuate the idea that it is acceptable for other cultures to adopt this practice, and that the custom has sexual connotations. In Lukin Linklater's installation, placed at the foot of a white subway tile artifice, were a series of stacks of postcard-sized prints for the audience to take away. In the middle of each print was a smudge. The mark was made by the artist's nose, covered in lipstick red, as she pressed it to the paper. In a moment of sympathetic magic, the print transferred the closeness associated with the puvipsuk custom, an unexpected gift that I carried with me as I exited the gallery space. Yet another layer of intimacy added to the mix.

When Tania Willard and I first met back in the spring of 2012 to discuss her ideas for *BLIZZARD*, she spoke about the potential for the exhibition to question the roots of the ongoing mythologizing and paternalism that persists with regards to the North. Her essay points to the recent installation of a giant Inuksuk (designed by a non-Inuk) on the shores of Vancouver's English Bay as but one example. The artworks in *BLIZZARD* refused to accommodate presumptions and the tendency to transform this diverse region into a myth. Through gestures that were often highly personal, the artworks chipped away at the ideologies that perceivably distance North and South. In doing so they exposed a middle ground, a site rich with meaning and potential understanding.

(Endnotes)

1 In Alaska, where Nicholas Galanin is from, there is little consensus between local residents and outside scientists on bear populations. See: <http://www.thegwpf.org/alaska-polar-bear-population-at-an-all-time-high/>. Sentiments in Nunavut are similar where there is a deep divide between local observation and scientific study with regards to polar bear populations. Local Inuit have documented a spike in bear populations, especially in hamlets like Arviat which are faced with an unprecedented number of bear encounters in their community. Meanwhile many scientists remain convinced of their decline. For recent local perspectives see "Besieged by Bears" available at <http://www.uphere.ca/node/850> and <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/story/2010/12/>

2 This sculpture was not included in the *BLIZZARD* exhibition.

3 Cited from an acquisition justification written by Christine Lalonde, Associate Curator, Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Canada, dated February, 2012 for the sculpture *Handcuffs*, 2011 by Jamasie Pitseolak

4 Cited from an in-person interview with Jamasie Pitseolak, Kinngait/Cape Dorset, January 2013.

Candice Hopkins is the Elizabeth Simonfay Curatorial Resident, Indigenous Art, at the National Gallery of Canada and is the former director and curator of the exhibitions program at the Western Front in Vancouver. She has an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture, Bard College, New York, where she was awarded the Ramapo Curatorial Prize for the exhibition *Every Stone Tells a Story: The Performance Work of David Hammons and Jimmie Durham* (2004). Her writing has been published by MIT Press, BlackDog Publishing, New York University, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Phillip, Banff Centre Press, and National Museum of the American Indian, among others. Hopkins has lectured at venues including Witte de With, Tate Modern, Dakar Biennale, Tate Britain, University of British Columbia and University of Victoria. Her recent curatorial projects include *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, a multi-venue exhibition in Winnipeg co-curated with Steve Loft, Jenny Western, and Lee-Ann Martin, and *Recipes for an Encounter*, co-curated with Berin Golonu for Dorsky Gallery, New York.