

ARCTIC OBSESSION

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MIGRATION

"The race for riches in the Arctic should never exceed the race of animals in their bid for survival." - Bill Zuk

INTRODUCTION

I was inspired to write about the Arctic because it is one of the most remarkable frontiers on Earth and gave me an opportunity to reconnect with my early teaching experiences in Canada's High Arctic. I was also motivated by the sweeping changes affecting polar regions. Rising temperatures and melting ice are beginning to drastically affect people's lives; nations are vying for sovereignty and trade routes through northern waters; economic development is intensifying in the quest for oil, gas, gold, and diamonds. These concerns spurred me to engage in living inquiry, returning to remote areas of the Arctic on photography and sketching fieldtrips to capture the raw beauty and fragility of the landscape and its people. In addition to representing my artistic responses, this article makes reference to other Canadian artists who have deepened our awareness and understanding about the Arctic.

Parts of this article were extracted from journal notes and sketchbook entries. They appear here in italics and the present tense.

Essence of Aurora

The northern lights in the High Arctic are magical and stir my creative thoughts.

Looking back, one of my most memorable experiences in the Arctic was that of the Aurora Borealis on a cold winter night, witnessing curtains of soft edged light wavering over the stars. I am in the middle of a group of Inuit children. Their delightful shrieks of laughter ring out in the starlit evening. In their cultural belief system, it is their ancestors being tossed back and forth in the sky that causes the dancing light. With a mixture of glee and fear, they whistle to call up the lights; they also rub their fingernails against one another in a soft, clicking sound to send the lights in retreat. The more time spent in the far north, the more my interest intensifies with light phenomena having mythological and supernatural qualities.

I am constantly drawing, photographing and constructing things. However, in my digital studio, experimentation with illuminated colours allows me to capture the essence of the Aurora with its radiant and shimmering light. Arctic Aura shown in Figure 1 depicts bold geometric lines and planes, a glow of spectral colours, and crystalline structures that suggest water and ice. These are things one might associate with the northern lights in an Arctic landscape.

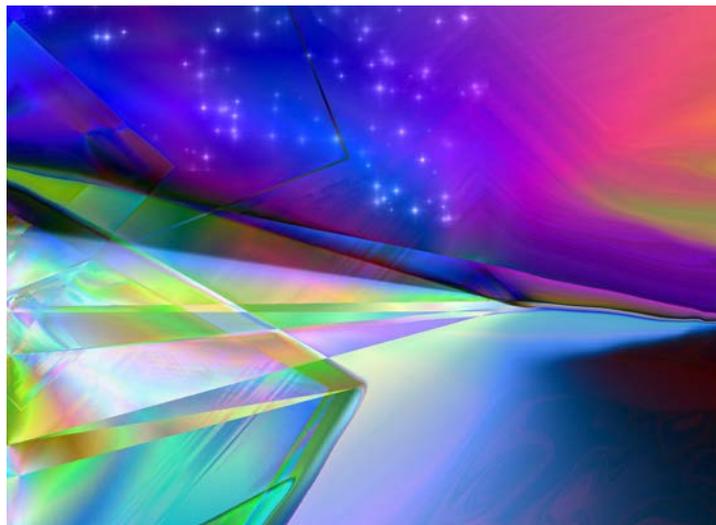


Figure 1 Arctic Aura. Print

As a tribute to the northern lights, I also wrote a poem that characterizes the mystical drama and richness of colour, light and movement of an Aurora evening.

Aurora

Surging bursts
Of swelling light
Curtains dance into the night.

Soft blood reds
And misty blues
Eerie greens
With sparkling hues

They dim and fade
Then twist and twine
Their source unknown
Must be divine.

Opal Ice

The spectacle of glaciers calving icebergs into the sea inspires me to reflect on their origins thousands of years ago and the forces that shaped their existence.

We are in zodiacs near Qaanaaq off the western coast of Greenland, home to some of the world's largest glaciers. Our craft is heading back to the mother ship following our hike to observe a herd of musk ox in a small valley. The Academic Ioffe, a Russian research vessel turned into a small cruise ship is anchored well off shore waiting for us to return. As we pull away from the ragged coastline, a light mist surrounds us; it thickens slowly reducing our visibility.

We can barely see the sheer white glacial cliffs in front of us as they disappear in a swirl of dense fog. The craft draws nearer. Suddenly, we hear a tremendous WHOMP and then a WHOOSH! A massive wall of ice gives way and tumbles into the frothing sea with a tremendous roar, breaking into a million shards. One monumental chunk remains intact and ever so slowly, submerges, rises, and tips slightly. We are witnessing the birth of an iceberg emerging from its 15,000 year- old glacier mother.

The cataclysmic birthing of this leviathan did not end here; a tsunami created from the displacement of water lifted our zodiac high on a cresting wave and then deep into a trough. There was no hesitation speeding away and I couldn't help looking back to admire the massive ice sculpture that would eventually make its journey to the high seas, ending up along the coastlines of Atlantic Canada.

The first stanza in Charles G. D. Robert's poem (2012) provides a wonderful account of an iceberg's birth:

The Iceberg

I WAS spawned from the glacier
A thousand miles due north
Beyond Cape Chidley
And the spawning
When my vast, wallowing bulk went under
Emerged and heaved aloft
Shaking down cataracts from its bobbing sides
With mountainous surge and thunder
Outraged the silence of the Arctic sea



Figure 2 Opal Ice. Print

Opal Ice shown in Figure 2 is an iconic image that references the sculptural beauty of ice with its steep, angled pyramid form and subtle play of translucent colours. The experience of seeing the massive glaciers of Greenland "birthing their offspring into the sea" inspired a poem called *Opal Ice*.

Opal Ice

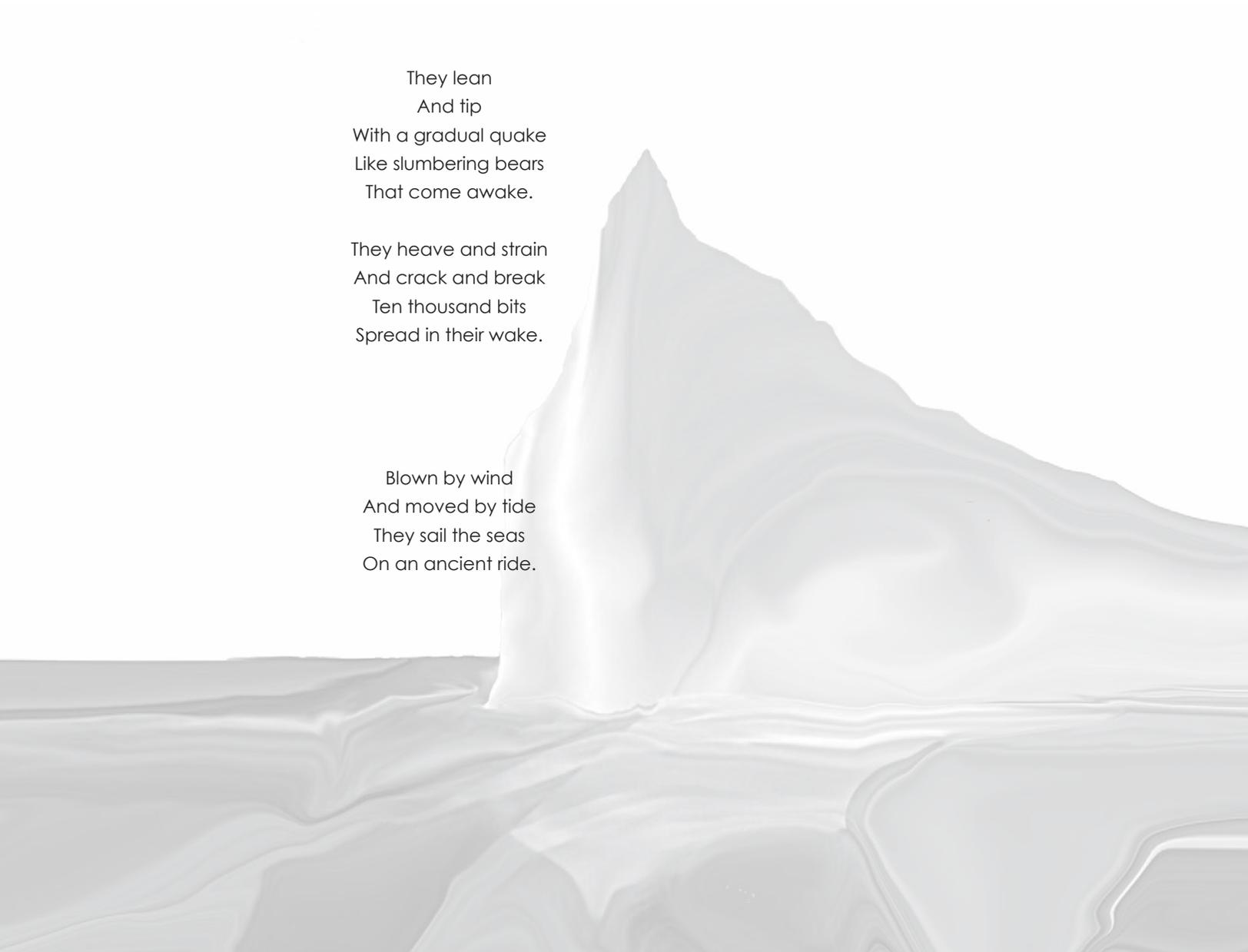
Opal fire
And lapis blue
Veins of green
Of every hue.

Pyramid mountains
Jagged sails
Smooth sleek skin
Like humpback whales.

They lean
And tip
With a gradual quake
Like slumbering bears
That come awake.

They heave and strain
And crack and break
Ten thousand bits
Spread in their wake.

Blown by wind
And moved by tide
They sail the seas
On an ancient ride.



Trapped in Ice

Being caught in a drifting ice pack during spring break-up in the Arctic can be fearful and exhilarating.

The prow of our freighter canoe noses towards Hall Beach, a tiny community in the High Arctic; the outboard motor churns the waters from glassy blue to frothy white. Our eyes are riveted on the horizon engulfed in blackness. As our craft approaches shore, hundreds and thousands of birds mill in clusters and then disperse. Spring is underway and the cacophony of honking, chattering, and wing beats is music to my ears. Birds keep landing on the water in front of us, king eiders and other diving ducks. They rest briefly before resuming their migratory journey to the nesting grounds.

Suddenly, we encounter pack ice the size of cars and then massive blocks the size of houses (known in Newfoundland as burgy bits). They are a magnificent, breathtaking sight and range from flat topped, pinnacled and domed to every combination imaginable. The channels for navigating our craft grow narrower leaving little room to maneuver. We find ourselves completely surrounded and trapped. Will we drift with the ice pack into the currents of the Foxe Basin or will we be crushed in the heaving and grinding?

We move slowly, waiting for an opening; the canoe edges over to a small iceberg and Enuja, our guide, climbs over the gunwale, onto an overhanging ledge. He crawls slowly up a slippery slope, balancing precariously as he scans the horizon looking for an open channel. Finally, he gestures and points into the distance.

The canoe pushes forward through the slush and frigid jumbled mix. A small opening appears but then our path is blocked again. It seems like an eternity before we are able to move forward, this time drifting tentatively and ever so slowly. Finally, a gap appears in front of us; it widens and we scrape through it. At the same time, we spot a sliver of land, then a tiny outcropping of buildings. Surely, this is Hall Beach. As the canoe races toward the rocky shoreline, we know we are nearing our destination.

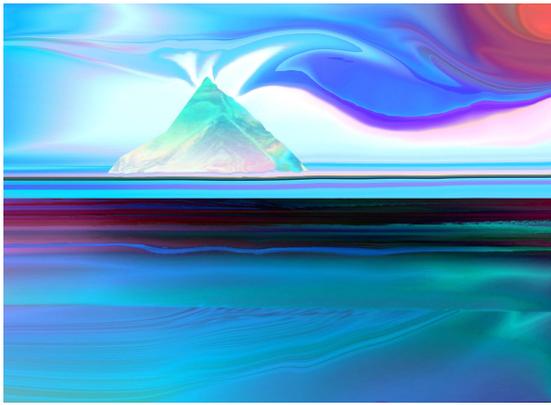


Figure 3 *Ice Discovery*. Print

Figure 3, *Ice Discovery* suggests an imaginary gathering of birds growing out of the clouds and the sky. From their lofty height, they marvel at a jewel-like iceberg floating on a calm sea.



Figure 4 *Glow Scape*. Cover design

Figure 4, *Glow Scape* appeared as a cover design in an earlier edition of the Journal. It is a scene that on first glance looks serene and perhaps even enchanting. However, below the horizon lies a translucent mass of colours and an angled form. Does danger lurk undersea? Could this be a submerged iceberg? Viewers are left to make their own interpretation.

The importance of ice in the life of seals is generally well known. They depend on it from birth through adulthood, using it for breathing holes, dens, and traveling under its surfaces. Figure 5 is an imaginative scene showing a family of seals transformed from ice.

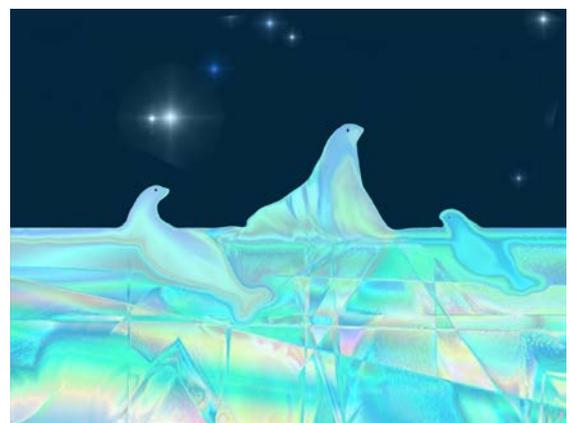


Figure 5 *Ice Seals*. Print

Sketch to Illuminated Sculpture

My ideas often begin with sketching and making collages from digital prints that can be laminated onto sculptural forms. These images emphasize prismatic colours of ice, its refractive qualities, and floating movement in water. Figures 7 and 8 show preliminary sketches and colour experimentation with simple geometric qualities: angularity, layering, splintering, and jaggedness. Figure 9 shows cut and bent paper forms used for fabricating plexiglass structures while Figures 10 depicts collages ready to be cut and laminated onto the sculptural surface in Figure 11. When transparency or backlit paper are used as a lamination material, tiny LEDs (light emitting diodes) can be installed along the bottom edge of the plexiglass structure. The lights can be controlled in terms of brightness, colour intensity and duration. The result is a unique illuminated sculpture representing the energy, mood, and glow of "Arctic light".

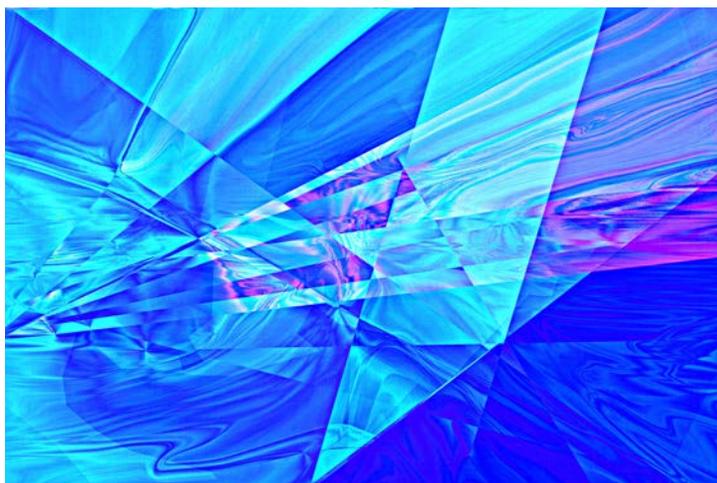


Figure 7 Ice Break. Print



Figure 8 Sculpture Fabrication

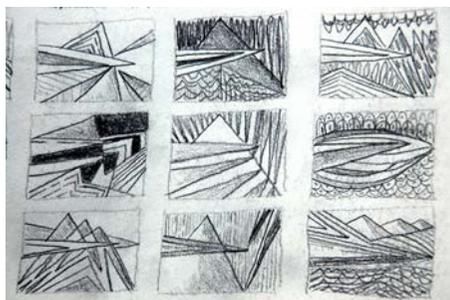


Figure 6 Ice Sketch



Figure 9 Collage Materials



Figure 10 *Leviathan*. Laminated sculpture

CHANGES IN THE ARCTIC

Changes occurring in the Arctic today are wide ranging. Recent collections of data presented by Jeffries (2012) indicate major shifts in the ocean systems resulting in serious declines in the thickness of sea ice cover. This ends up in warmer and less salty upper zones of ocean water. Loss of sea ice produces a cascading effect that affects marine organisms and the habitats of seals, walrus, and polar bears. It also affects the lives of indigenous people who depend on stable ice conditions for hunting. What is startling is that the Arctic sea ice does not appear to be recovering from annual declines. Inuit people report that each year the ice melts earlier and also warm summers are longer and hotter.

The impact of change can also be observed in the increase of marine traffic and new ocean routes – cargo ships and tankers are taking advantage of ice-free waters. Blockages of ice that once prevented travel through Canada's Northwest Passage have become much less of a hindrance. Cruise ship tourism has become very popular in recent years. With the increase of marine traffic comes the concern of accidents; the grounding of ships and of course, pollution. Many conflicts and challenges lie ahead (Grant, 2010).

Industrial development in the Arctic is extensive. The Alaska-Prudhoe Bay oil complex is a striking example of what is to come with thousands of oil wells and roads already built. Oil spills of any kind are very damaging to a fragile tundra environment and the ability to respond with clean-up operations is challenging. The race to develop oil, gas, diamond, and mineral deposits is intensifying throughout the circumpolar world. As these developments continue, there is a need to listen to the voices of indigenous people in decision-making processes that affect their future and ours.

VIDEO POETRY

My latest artwork explores the medium of video and poetry as a way of reaching a more diverse audience. The production of *I am Arctic* (Zuk and Gilson, 2011) focuses on elemental forces of nature and the raw beauty of the Arctic. Dreamlike images depict the Aurora Borealis sweeping into the stars and elders sharing their knowledge with a new generation of youth. The script and some of the images for a second video titled *Broken silence, broken earth* appear below. Imagine the set of sequenced images in Figures 11- 19 dissolving and being replaced by the next one as the video is played. The voice is that of the North as it experiences the pain of change.

Once there was silence
And sanctity,
Now there is noise
And broken earth.

I hear
the roar of jets
in the silent sky
of the midnight sun.

I see
the glaciers
slip into the sea:
cracking,
crashing,
crumbling
A million sparkling bits.

I feel
the ships
break my skin of ice
for the glory
of the Northwest Passage.

I see
the ice bear
searching, searching
for the satin seal
on shards of slippery ice.



Figure 11 *Sun Jet*.



Figure 12 *Glory Ship*.



Figure 13 *Ice Bear*.

I hear
the cry of wolves:
wild,
woeful,
wailing
through winds
and drifts of storm.



Figure 14 Wolf Cry.

I feel
the earth quiver
as clanking metal
scrapes my tundra coat.

I hear
the whine of diamond bits
cutting deep
into my bowels.



Figure 15 Cutting Deep.

I feel
the spills of oil
on my flesh,
pipelines on my back.
billowing smoke
rising to the Aurora and the stars.

And in this world of sweeping change...

Who will listen
to our stories of sun and stars
and Sedna in the sea?



Figure 16 Oil Spill.

Who will listen
to the drumbeats?
The tales of medicine and sacred earth,
the songs of snow
of dances and dreams?



Figure 17 *Dance and Dreams.*

Who will listen to our voices
and our wisdom
in the rush for oil and gas and gold?



Figure 18 *Drumbeat.*

Rise up knowledge keepers;
rise up, be heard.
No longer silent
in this land of noise and broken earth.



Figure 19 *Rise Up.*

ARTISTS OF THE ARCTIC

Many Canadian artists have been captivated with the North and its remarkable nature. Some are brief visitors; others have made the Arctic their home, capturing its uniqueness over a long period of time.

Lawren Harris

One of the Group of Seven's prominent painters, Lawren Harris had a strong affinity for the Canadian North expressed in a thoughtful comment:

We live on the fringe of the great North across the whole continent and its spectral flow, its clarity, its replenishing power passes through us to the teeming people south of us.....the Canadian characteris born of the spirit of the north and reflects it. (Murray and Fulford, cover leaf, 1973)

On a two-month trip into the High Arctic aboard the S.S. Beothic in 1930 with colleague, A.Y. Jackson, Harris painted *Icebergs, Davis Strait* (www.groupofseven.ca/). He reduced the subject matter to its simplest form, creating columned layers of blue and green ice on a contrasting background. He shared his feelings about the sketches and paintings created on the trip:

My work was founded on a long and growing love and understanding of the North and being permeated by its spirit. I felt the long brooding presence of nature fostering a

new race, a new age, and as part of it, a new expression in art. It was an unfolding of the heart itself through the effect of environment, of people, place, and time. (Murray and Fulford, 1973, p.144)

Harris's paintings were intricately connected with Nature and abstraction; he moved from creating stylized and idealized landscapes of the Arctic to exploring non-objective art in his later years. His interpretations are based on visitation but they show a deep understanding of the elements and forces that shape the Arctic.

David Blackwood

Farley Mowat and David Blackwood (1973) chronicled the lives of people living on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador; journeys that took mariners into Arctic waters for fishing and sealing. November storms battered the ships and every year the sea and ice took its toll of life. Mowat's storytelling is revealing:

I never saw worse weather at the front. I dare say there were few enough managed to sleep sound that night. The grinding and the roaring of the ice was enough to put the fear of the Lord into any man. Wild? I went on deck a time or two and I didn't know the words to tell what it was like. It was all a man could do to keep his feet, and the sleet cut into you like shot. (Mowat 1973, p.122)

Blackwood's drawing and printmaking artistry complement Mowat's storytelling in a superb fashion. Blackwood's heritage comes from a long line of sea captains; he knows the ocean and its capacity to give life and take it away. His depiction of ships and boats pitching and tossing in turbulent waves, groups of shipwrecked men huddling on sea ice anticipating rescue; families waiting by lamp light for their loved ones to return, coffins and funeral processions wending their way to cemeteries, and ghostly souls rising from the dead – these images are unforgettable. In *Black ice, prints of Newfoundland* (www.ago.net/blackice-david-blackwoodprints-ofnewfoundland), we see the grandeur of ice bergs, behemoths dwarfing ships on an ice filled ocean. The scenes leave little doubt about the challenges faced by people living on the edges of the Arctic in Atlantic Canada.

Toni Onley

Toni Onley had a fascination with ice and snow, and from his home in Vancouver would regularly fly his plane to remote places where there were glaciers, high mountains or hidden lakes. He made his first trip to the High Arctic aboard a Canadian icebreaker in 1974 and subsequently returned the following year, piloting his small aircraft on a 10,000 kilometer journey to Baffin Island. A decade later, he boarded a coast guard vessel in eastern Canada whose mission was to declare sovereignty in Canada's northern waters. On each trip, he kept a journal, sketched and painted

his impressions using watercolours and oil. His daily records show a particular interest in geography and the historical events of early Arctic explorers. As a watercolourist, Onley was moved by the mystical qualities of light reflected on ice, snow and in fog; he wielded a paintbrush with quick, skilful strokes. The cover of his book *Onley's Arctic* (1989), shows the beauty of a shifting, ephemeral landscape filled with drifting ice. Some of Onley's Arctic impressions were translated into serigraphic work; his plein air watercolours stand out in capturing the "mysterious and the mystical".

Ted Harrison

Ted Harrison developed a unique perspective of northern life during his 27 years as a teacher and artist in the Yukon (Gibson, 2010). He was very interested in community life and has a remarkable ability as a storyteller. His palette is bold, comprising of simple colours, often outlined; his imagery depicts bright Aurora skies, undulating waves with fish boats, historical buildings dating to the Klondike gold rush, and legendary figures such as Sam McGee (Harrison, 2007) based on the poems of Robert W. Service (Service, 1953). The exploration of gold and other commodities is continuing in the Yukon; there are environmental concerns with mining operations.

Harrison developed a system of simplifying subject matter and eliminating costume and facial details, allowing gestures and movements of his characters to tell a story. This style became his trademark in producing bold rollicking landscapes teeming with animals, people, and sun filled skies. His serigraph, *Village bell* (tedharrison.com/shop/serigraphsthe-village-bell-1981) is an example of community activity honouring the life of indigenous people on their way to church; a tolling bell intermingles with a sunlit sky. Ted Harrison glorified the Yukon in a celebration of brightness and what he called "paradise".

Inuit Artists

The indigenous cultures of Canada's Arctic have a history dating back thousands of years. Present day Inuit descendents actively engage in art making, often representing generations of families living in the same household. Some are interested in carrying on the traditions of drawing, printmaking and sculpture based on old and established beliefs and customs while others are experimenting with new and different ideas that rebuild and revitalize their culture (Zuk and Dalton, 1999).

Kenojuak Ashevak

At age 86, Kenojuak is one of the most senior and celebrated Inuit artists in the Canadian Arctic. She is renowned for her radial designs of owls that celebrate light, life and living. Her *Enchanted owl*, a stylized bird with radiating red and black feathers, appeared on a Canadian postage stamp while her *Sun and foliage* print was selected as an innovative artwork for a textbook (Zuk and Bergland, 1997). The cycle of the seasons and the return of the sun after long winter nights have always inspired her artwork.

Shuvina Ashoona

Shuvina Ashoona is the daughter and grand-daughter of artists who were prominent graphic artists. Her earlier artworks were small and depicted the land with rocky tundra, sparse vegetation, streams, waterfalls, and aerial perspectives with delicate details. Some of her later work is less naturalistic and darker in mood showing passenger jets, helicopters and oil tanker spills documented by Amos (2012). Shuvina's latest drawings and prints are signs of a changing Arctic.

CONCLUSIONS

The Arctic has been portrayed in many ways. Some artists see it as a place of deep fascination, seductive charm, a place with profound meaning (Gopnik, 2001). Some welcome it for its solitary meditation, as a retreat or escape. Others see it in more radical ways as fierce, brutal, and extreme. The Arctic has also been depicted in nostalgic ways as a place for social life, community activity, and celebration. A variety of perceptions and meanings about the Arctic are evident, including the ways it is changing.

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