

# SAIMAIYU AKESUK

Prints 2013-15

CURATED BY:  
DR. NANCY CAMPBELL

June 16 – July 15, 2017

Opening Reception  
Friday, June 16  
6:30-8:30 pm



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# SAIMAIYU AKESUK: PRINTS 2013-15

BY DR. NANCY CAMPBELL

The long-established Annual Cape Dorset Print Collection produced by the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative in Cape Dorset, referred to now by the Inuktitut name Kinngait, in Nunavut, has annually catalogued collections of between 30 and 60 images as well as numerous commissions and special releases every

year since 1959. This industry has resulted in a massive archive of prints produced in the region by Inuit artist members. The art-producing arm of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative (WBEC) known now as Kinngait Studios has the distinction of being the longest continuously running print studio in Canada. Despite these impressive origins and prolific print output, studio production is constantly changing to allow artists to create and sell art to new audiences. The Annual Cape Dorset Print Collection is still the main thrust at the studios, which train, mentor, and employ numerous master printers who work collaboratively with each artist, the original drawings, and the Co-op advisors to produce extraordinary prints of superb quality for the collection every year. The primary market for Inuit prints in Canada and abroad has historically been conservative, favouring images of a pristine North, set in a not so distant past. These prints of life on the land, animals, legends and family life quickly became understood as the “official” or canonical oeuvre of Inuit works on paper. Today, with the passing of many Elders, the Studio looks towards its newest members to add to the depth and breadth of the print portfolio, carefully expanding on the content presented in the portfolio, while balancing both traditional and contemporary imagery and incorporating many print-making techniques, including stone cut, lithography, etching and aquatint. The Annual Print Collection is constantly evolving.

Born in 1988, Saimaiyu Akasuk is an example of the rapid change in Nunavut and the benefits and challenges of this acceleration. Saimaiyu successfully completed her four-year Nunavut Teaching Education Program—now available through Arctic College—in 2014 and assumed her first full-time position as an elementary teacher at the Sam Pudlat School in Kinngait. A busy



working mother, she has had five children and currently lives with two, the others having been adopted, as often happens in the community. Saimaiyu's introduction to the Co-op was through artist Ningeokuluk Teevee (b. 1963), a friend and artistic mentor whom she met while at Arctic College in 2010. Ningeokuluk encouraged the reluctant Saimaiyu to develop the doodles in her notebooks on larger format paper and experiment with the range of coloured pencils offered by the Co-op.

Saimaiyu Akesuk was born in Iqaluit (as is health protocol for mothers in the Eastern Arctic) and has lived her whole life in Kinngait. She is a member of a small group of fourth generation artists working at Kinngait Studios. Saimaiyu's generation—unlike her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents—is the first generation that were raised entirely in the community, as opposed to on the land, with regular access to the world through television, Facebook, schooling and limited travel. Given her position as a fourth generation artist, who does not work in the communal studio space due to her teaching responsibilities, it is interesting that her spectacular drawings recall the work of Elders such as Papiara Tukiki (b. 1942) and Sheojuk Etidlooie (1929-1999), with large bold central figures and an aggressive drawing style. Her marks are very graphic, intentional, and heavy, resulting in a unique drawing surface which appears crosshatched. The marks of her coloured pencils translate perfectly in

[continued overleaf]

stone cut and lithography, giving each print a textured, rich surface. To date Akesuk has produced 16 prints for the Cape Dorset Print Collection, beginning in 2013 with the inclusion of five prints. Saimaiyu states that she enjoys working with the printers at the studios and particularly loves seeing her rich use of colour layered on each print. Colour is something the artist repeatedly brings up when discussing her work. She delights in how the colours relate to each other and add a whimsical dimension to her subjects.

Saimaiyu's imagery focuses on animal themes, transformation scenes, and insects, but most noteworthy is her unconventional use of colour. Her palette incorporates bright primary and tertiary colours that are heavily rendered in a dense, cross-hatching style that allows the colour to vibrate and create texture on the paper. Her practice of using central images without background detail recall the wonderful prints of Kenojuak Ashevak (1927-2013) who effectively used a central image, such as in her infamous print, *Enchanted Owl* (1960). Akesuk's prints of insects are spirited and playful. Insects are certainly abundant in Northern summers and do appear in many drawings previously done by artists from Kinngait. Insects are typically represented in swarms in summer camp scenes, with the notable exception of the insect drawings done by Annie Pootoogook after 2005, featuring nasty, detailed bees and insects as the subject. These images, however, were never produced as prints. Akesuk's charming prints *Qaumajaq (Fly, 2014)* with its golden tear-shaped yellow wings and the bright orange *Hot Spider* (2015) are examples of her more playful approach. A shift in the collecting base for Dorset prints was seen with the inclusion of these images as they were sought after by collectors of contemporary art as opposed to collectors of traditional Inuit prints. Unlike many of her peers, Akesuk has aspirations to continue her art education in the South; however, with vast distances, little connectivity to Internet services, and the expense of travel, these thoughts remain hopes at this time. Saimaiyu Akesuk's ambition, curiosity and willingness to learn are incentivizing. It is a conundrum for Inuit artists to challenge traditional expectations of Inuit art and embrace the globalizing influence of contemporary art, a world that is increasingly open to local perspectives in an increasingly broad and interconnected world. Her dynamic drawings and prints mark great possibility and excitement to the creation of new audiences for the Cape Dorset Print Collection.

#### Artist Bio

##### **SAIMAIYU AKESUK**

Saimaiyu Akesuk was born on April 28, 1988, in Iqaluit and lives in Cape Dorset. Her parents are Lau and Olayuk Akesuk; Olayuk was one of the first Members of the Legislative Assembly in Nunavut. Her grandfather was carver Latcholassie Akesuk (1919-2000). Fehelley Fine Arts, a commercial gallery in Toronto, presented her drawings at Art Toronto for the first time in 2013 and received immediate attention from the contemporary arts community. Saimaiyu has since had the opportunity to travel to Brooklyn to participate in a symposium in 2015 and to Portland, Oregon for a solo commercial exhibition in 2017 that stimulated her interest in making art.

#### Author Bio

##### **DR. NANCY CAMPBELL**

Dr. Nancy Campbell has been a contemporary art curator for the past twenty years. She has held positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Guelph, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and The Power Plant. In 2006 she curated an exhibition for The Power Plant on the work of Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook that travelled nationally and internationally, propelling Pootoogook to be included in Documenta 12 and win the Sobey Art Prize in 2007. Since that time, Nancy has focused her curatorial practice on the contemporary Inuit, producing many exhibitions attempting to bridge the Inuit with contemporary art.

#### Images

Cover: *Qaumajaq (Fly)*, 2014, stone cut and stencil, 94.8 x 62 cm

Interior: *Hot Spider*, 2015, lithograph, 76 x 56.7 cm

### Open Studio

401 Richmond Street West  
Suite 104  
Toronto ON Canada M5V 3A8  
416 504 8238  
office@openstudio.ca

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