

# WHERE NATURE RULES, WAYS OF LEARNING

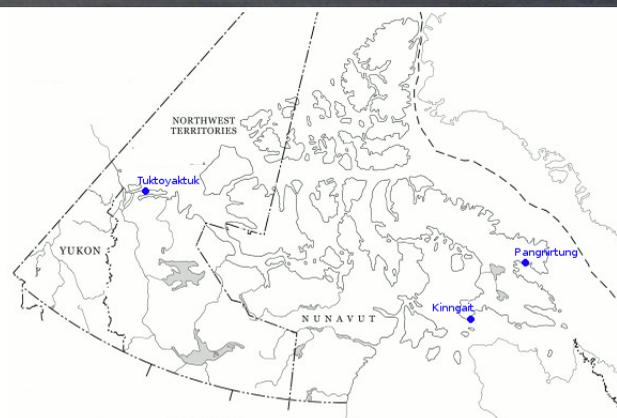
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## **Introduction**

In late fall, on the west coast of British Columbia, we grab our umbrellas and hunker down for the rainy season. There is still daylight at eight in the morning. Meanwhile, the people of Tuktoyaktuk, a tiny hamlet within the Arctic Circle, in the western Arctic, will not experience dawn until around 11 A.M. and the sun won't stay around for long either. In the far North, this is a season of long shadows with frigid temperatures and carpets of snow and ice. Luminous light casts itself upon a visually serene landscape (Figure 1).

The hamlet of Tuk as it has come to be known, sits upon a frozen slender layer of soil atop permafrost far beyond the tree line. The landscape is perfectly flat, endless, and humble in its beauty. The closest

neighbour to this tiny community of 900 is Inuvik, which lies approximately forty minutes or so by plane to the southwest. I usually travel to the Arctic between my teaching assignments in Victoria, during April and May, when temperatures range from minus 5 to minus 30 degrees Celsius and the sun has returned to the sky after a long period of darkness.



## Enchantment

I travel to the Arctic on a regular basis; it is the blue twilight that I originally wanted to see and experience. As an artist, much of what I create centres on atmosphere, light and landscape. Visiting the Arctic in the spring is desirable because of its long twilight; the atmospheric colours whisper to one another – gentle pinks meld into pale violets, delicate cerulean blues creep slowly upward to mingle with intense indigo; the colors constantly change. Leonardo da Vinci once said: "Make your portrait at twilight or in clouds or mist. Works painted then have more insight, and every face becomes beautiful" (source unknown). I wonder what he would have thought of twilight as it emerged in an Arctic landscape.

When I'm in the North, I often donate my time to instruct printmaking, amongst other projects. This is very much welcomed in the smaller communities. There is often little in the way of art supplies in such remote areas, so I gather and ship the supplies and equipment prior to my departure. As I often travel solo, I'm fortunate enough to spend time with the Inuit people and have glimpses into their culture.



Joel Ross Gruben, William McIntyre and Devightt Raddi, students from the Mangilaluk School, Tuktoyaktuk, preparing for their kite making assignment

## My Journey to Tuktoyaktuk

In mid April there is no period of complete darkness in the high Arctic; Tuk experiences varying degrees of twilight for a full 8½ hours, as the sun dips below the horizon. The beauty of the light at that time of year and the landscape fulfilled my hopes and expectations ... and then some. But it is the people of the North that draw me back. Their good-natured ways in the face of adversity, their ability to laugh often – even at themselves – along with their rugged and positive acceptance of life, is a joy to experience.

On my first visit to Tuk, I spent time with the younger students at the Mangilaluk School. I chose kite flying as a topic because it combined an outdoor activity with printmaking that could be done in the classroom. There was a limited amount of time for a group of young students to complete the complex folding and tying to make a kite, the prelude to a printmaking project. The children, who range in age from five to their teens, closely followed the example. What I found interesting was their lack of hesitation, uncanny quickness and hand-to-eye dexterity in unravelling knots and tangles in the kite-line. What I also experienced was their strong visual, copy/mimic way of learning, with little verbal instruction when it came time to make a relief print.

Tuktoyaktuk landscape in summer

My second visit to Tuk was in the summer. The landscape had drastically changed. In summer, the pockets of water on the land had become visible and were surrounded by flat tundra. I took time to embrace the landscape and experience the fullness of the sun as it slowly created long shadows and dipped towards the horizon as evening approached. From the air, the land resembles Swiss cheese. Everything appears flat, calm and serene.



Image of the Tuktoyaktuk region from the air during summer

I worked alongside a group of children from the community, ages 5 to 16, who were refurbishing an old historic boat, the sixty foot *Our Lady of Lourdes*. This was purely a volunteer effort. There was no set schedule and the children came at various times throughout the day to work on the boat. Again, it was the experience of being with the children that was the most fascinating. In repairing the old supply boat, the children showed confidence to tackle just about anything. I observed one small girl of approximately six in a skirt and striped stockings who stood watching for a few minutes and then climbed the ladder to scrape the paint off the boat, alongside the other children.

The children grabbed scrapers, and later brushes and paint, only stopping to don an old adult T-shirt over their clothing. Little wooden ladders were erected and the boat was refurbished plank-by-plank. The enterprising and well-loved Sister Fay Trombley, a retired nun who has made Tuk her home, gathered donated supplies and was the conduit of this endeavour; the children accomplished the task with little hesitation. There was no instruction; once started the children continued by mimicking the older children and also found innovative ways to replace missing planks. Self-confidence played a major role in this event. It seemed very different from more structured classroom situations found in urban classrooms of the South.





Children of Tuktoyaktuk refurbishing the *Lady of Lourdes*

My fascination with the abilities I'd seen the children of the North display, led me to consider my conversations with Maureen Pokiak. I stayed with her and her family during my first visit to Tuktoyaktuk. Maureen is a teacher who came to Tuk from Saskatchewan. Her husband of thirty years, James Pokiak, was born and raised in Tuk. They have deep roots in the community with many of their children and grandchildren around them.

Maureen told me how the old ways of the Inuit culture continue, how the children, as they reach the age of five or so, are given space to get to know their environment. The community is small, so there is always someone watching out for them, but in general the children play, climb, and learn to set their own limits. In a harsh environment it's important that the children become self-reliant. The words "don't do that, you might fall" are not part of the Inuktitut vocabulary and the children are spoken to in a soft, respectful voice. The children stand strong and become solidly aware of their environment and their own abilities and limitations at an early age. I believe this has much to do with the ways of learning I had already encountered in the culture. In a recent article about the importance of play, *Just Playing or Justified Play*,



Refurbishing the *Lady of Lourdes*



Refurbishing the *Lady of Lourdes*

Melissa Gogolinski (2012) talks about the necessity of play and exploration of a child's physical world being of paramount importance. I believe the interaction of the Inuit child with play in their physical world supports that conclusion.

I learned much about the children during the time spent refurbishing the boat. They talked with excitement about going hunting with their families at the Husky Lakes and obtaining "country food" such as caribou, whale, goose, fish and seal, their main diet. Their love of the land and the outdoors is strong. I can't emphasize enough how learning by observing and then doing is such a major element in the children's lives and as such is an invaluable tool in all forms of teaching and learning. The children of Tuk spend a great deal of their time with their parents on the land during the summer months and often become involved at an early age with the gathering and preparation of food which is eaten fresh, or stored for the winter months. This is still an important way of life.



Refurbishing the *Lady of Lourdes*



The Lady of Lourdes – through the hatch



The textile artist, Anna, working at the loom.

## My Journey to Pangnirtung

My most recent trip to the eastern Arctic was to Pangnirtung on Baffin Island, where I was artist-in-residence at the Uqurmiut Centre for the Arts. Uqurmiut is the home of both a printmaking and a textile studio. Printmaking was introduced in the North in the 1950s by James Houston who worked as an Administrator for the Canadian government.

I was faced with a new challenge – how to communicate – since most of the older generation in the eastern Arctic speak only Inuktitut. I was provided with an interpreter for some of my presentations, demonstrations, and workshops in printmaking. The language barrier in my workshop with some of the textile artists was less restrictive than I had expected. Again, the flow of learning by watching, followed by mimicking and adapting ideas was exceptional. This was accompanied by voice and gesture and even singing songs in our respective languages.

Later, while observing the weavers at their looms, I stood in awe of their skills. The tapestries are often several feet in length and width; the artist weaves the colourations intricately into the work. This in itself is complex. I then discovered that the weavers often work from a drawing, created by an artist in the community; the art is drawn in crayon on a piece of butcher paper less than a foot in width. The imagery and draft information is propped up on the wooden bar on the loom in front of the weaver (paper is scarce in the Arctic) and is accompanied with a colour selection of yarn chosen for the tapestry. The drawing often contains limited information.

When the weavers work from such drawings, they not only translate the drawing, but increase the size, often up to six-fold, while maintaining the scale and complex colouration of the drawing. The perceptual abilities of the textile artists are outstanding.

## Inside the Arctic Circle: Observing Adaptability

Before leaving Pangnirtung, I travelled to Auyittuq National Park to the north. The park offers a dazzling array of beauty as well as the challenge of weather elements. Three of us were led by a local guide, travelling by snowmobile, foot and qamutik (a sled) with box walls.

The land is large and treeless with steep sided, angular mountains that drop sharply to the valley floor. At first my mind tried to judge the distances, as it usually does in my everyday world, but here it was unsuccessful because there is little to make a comparison measure in the treeless terrain. I had to switch off the



Snowmobile facing into the Auyiuttuq National Park, near Pangnirtung, Baffin Island.

continual chatter of my brain as it tried to resolve this predicament. Looking, and knowing what is, replaces questioning what is and is not. I keep good company – Toni Onley (1989), in his book *Onley's Arctic*, talked about “his profoundly altered state of the brain”, in his journeys to the Arctic. I can't help wondering whether such an environment supports a different way of encountering landscapes and learning about one's surroundings. I have experienced this time and again in the North.

As we travelled through the pass in the park, the winds reached 70 to 100 kilometers per hour. The temperature of  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$  felt like  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  with the wind chill factor. At times it was wise to just stand and lean into the wind. The skies remained a rich blue and the dream-like landscape was stunning as we continued on to our destination; a marker indicated we had entered the Arctic Circle.

Our guide seemed perfectly at ease with the landscape and the harsh conditions; he travelled light with a container of gasoline, being the only visible addition to his gear. This was strapped to the back of the qamutik. While he remained comfortable and

at ease, he was also ready for any situation. A lens fell out of one of my companion's sunglasses. Being without eye protection is dangerous – it can lead to snow blindness. The guide sat with his back against a rock to shield himself from the wind, brought out a small tool, and quietly fixed the glasses.

As we began our return journey, the wind was whipping copious amounts of snow, ice, and silt around us; our guide noticed that the qamutik needed repair. He reached into his pocket and like a magician pulled out several small pieces of twine to reinforce the sled. Here, I realized this was the way of the Inuit. Solidly equal to the task, always prepared, and with creative resolve in a harsh and unforgiving environment, they seemed ready for anything and everything.

I saw ingenuity and resourcefulness. When there is a limited amount of materials, people find innovative ways to work; I sometimes limit materials in my classroom setting in the south to re-create this attitude towards learning. I find this often leads to resourcefulness and development of skills in problem solving and adaptability.



Author in Auyiuttuq National Park, near a small Inukshuk trail marker



Members of the group in the windswept Auyiuttuq National Park, Baffin Island



Guide fixing the glasses for a member of the group, Auyuittuq National Park

### My Journey to Kinngait (Cape Dorset)

I also travelled to Kinngait during this trip to the eastern Arctic – perhaps better known by its old name of Cape Dorset. For a printmaker, this was the ultimate experience – to visit the jewel of the North, the Kinngait Print Studio. Kinngait began wowing the world with its prints over 50 years ago, in the same year the western world put a man into space. The stone-cutters use delicate yet strong Japanese woodcutting tools, to carve fine detail into the slate from which they create their print imagery. The idea of using a tool designed for the softness of wood, to carve something as hard as slate, would be unfathomable to most woodblock carvers; but in an environment where obstacles are common and supplies are limited, anything is possible.

My own work has been influenced by the art of the Inuit people. I'm fascinated by the way the imagery in Inuit prints seems to float on the page, often surrounded as it often is by the pristine white of the paper. I now incorporate embossing into my imagery to preserve the white of the paper while providing detail.

Having the good fortune to stay with Jimmy and Pitseolala Manning and their family in Kinngait, I experienced a sincere kindness in them both and a love of the land and their cultural ways. Jimmy was the manager of the Kinngait Print Studio for many years; he is now actively involved with other aspects of the community, such as working on the housing shortage. His world encompasses both the traditional and the progressive. He is a quiet man with a great deal of energy and resolve.



Printmaker preparing ink at the Kinngait Studios, (Kinngait – Cape Dorset)



Specialized printmaking brushes, Kinngait Studios, (Kinngait – Cape Dorset)



Before I left, Jimmy and Pitseolala took me to one of the high points in the mountains above Kinngait. We travelled quickly by snowmobile to beat the failing light and stopped at a cone-shaped inukshuk. The view of the softly rolling hilltops and the frozen ocean below was breathtaking. Jimmy handed me a small rock to place in one of the crevices of the inukshuk and told me it would be there for a very long time; he and Pitseolala each placed a rock into the inukshuk as well. As we arrived back in Kinngait, that magical light of the setting sun stretched over the mountains and frozen ocean.

Jimmy told me that a shaman who was quite old had chosen that location for the inukshuk; the task of building was completed by three Inuit women. The visionary shaman said that one day a community would live at the base of the mountain and there would be a flag flying above it. That community became a reality and the flag it proudly bears today is that of the new territory, Nunavut, established in 1999. *Namonai's Dream* (2012), a lithograph, was created by Napachi Pootagook in 1996. It tells the story of the shaman. It is truly Inuit, incorporating the beautiful story-telling drawing, applying progressive ideas (the art of printmaking, taken into the culture) with the traditional (the visual story).



Pitseolala and Jimmy Manning beside the Inukshuk, on the mountain above Cape Dorset



Setting sun, Cape Dorset

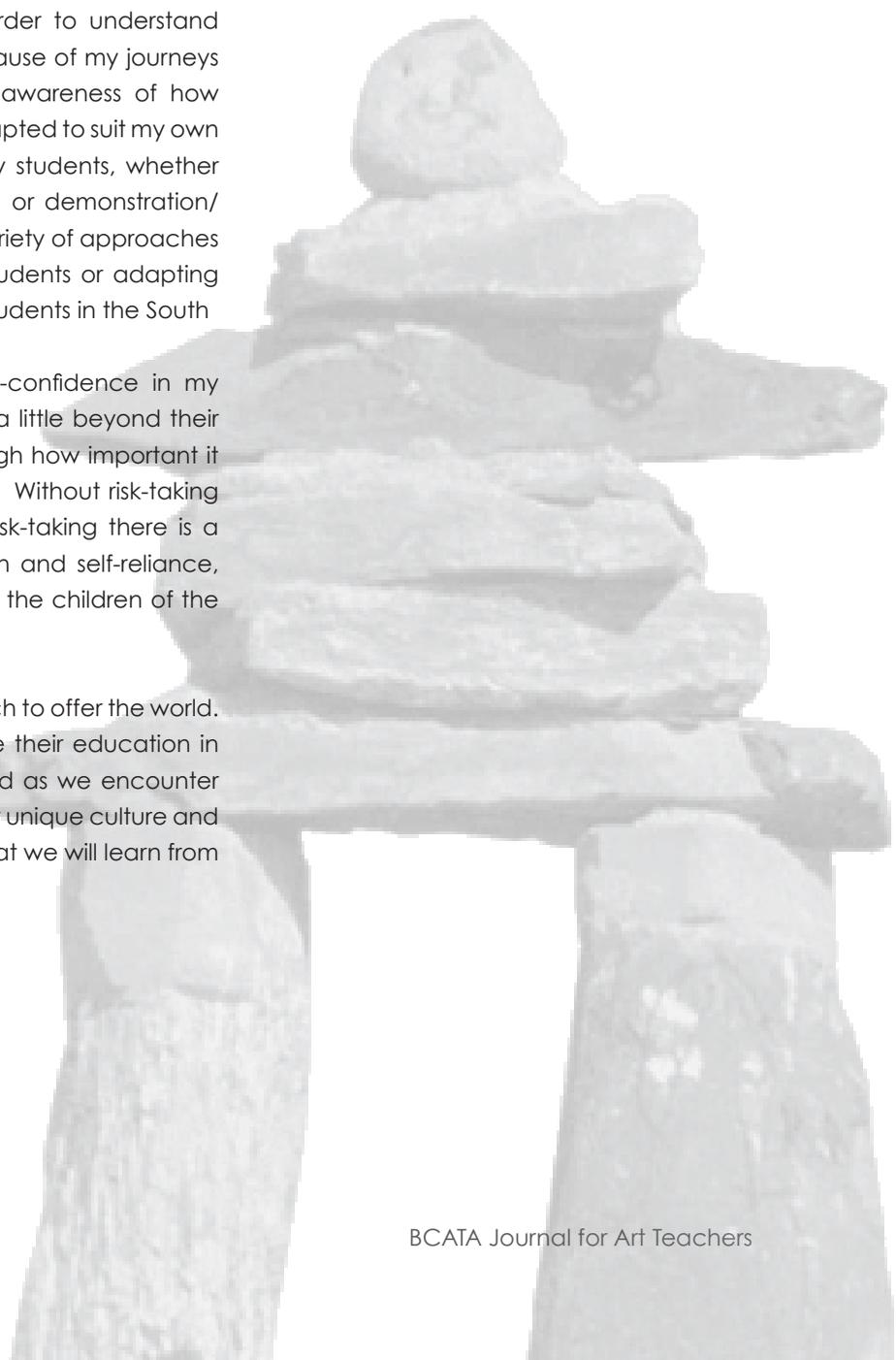
## Teaching and Learning: Shared Experience

I have been fortunate to stay in several Arctic communities, getting to know the people, and discovering the wealth of their experiences. I admire their joy of life as well as their deep understanding and love of the natural world. And I am coming to appreciate their family ways and the richness of their diverse traditions. This represents the fabric of a people who embrace their history and ways of life on the land as they adjust to life in permanent communities.

Not only is it enriching to travel to an incredibly different landscape and meet such wonderful people but, as a teacher, I find it invaluable to travel away from my own cultural base in order to understand my own cultural ways better. Because of my journeys to the Arctic, I have a greater awareness of how teaching and learning can be adapted to suit my own individual needs and those of my students, whether they involve visual, tactile, verbal or demonstration/mimicking. I now use a greater variety of approaches while working one-on-one with students or adapting to larger class situations with my students in the South

I also look for ways to instill self-confidence in my students by urging them to push a little beyond their comfort zone. I can't stress enough how important it is for a student to experience risk. Without risk-taking there is often little growth; with risk-taking there is a much greater possibility of growth and self-reliance, similar to what I experienced with the children of the North.

The people of the Arctic have much to offer the world. As some travel south to complete their education in various trades and professions and as we encounter them, I hope we will embrace their unique culture and diverse ways of learning ... and that we will learn from them and with them.



Samples of My Artwork



Samples of My Artwork



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