

## Jenn Robins

CHRISTINE CLARK

A printmaker with a secret ingredient and a love of the North.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Jenn Robins

Looking through Jenn Robins' photographs from Tuktoyaktuk you see a vast expanse of blue white, the snow and the sky, broken only occasionally by a tiny airplane or an overwhelmed building. One picture shows the blue shadow of a woman in Arctic clothing stretching outwards across the windblown snow, a self portrait. In another is a close-up of Robins' face, although all that can be seen of her are her black-brown English eyes, smiling and peering out from under several layers of protective clothing (pink and lavender) and snow encrusted fur. She looks happy.

Considering the beauty of the Arctic, it's not hard to imagine why anyone would want to visit. She writes in her artist statement for an upcoming show that "she was intent on experiencing the blue light of the North—the blue spectrum of the Arctic light with all its luminous qualities." She's an artist, after all, a respected printmaker to be precise, so it's no wonder the colour is so appealing, but during our interview she elaborates on her reason why. With a smile in her voice she says, "I have a list of things I want to do in my life, one a year. I try to push myself, anything from holding a worm in my hand (I'm terrified of worms) to this, and this was something I really wanted to do."

Robins has travelled north three times in the last several years; twice to Tuktoyaktuk (once in the spring and snow, and once in the summer,

when it's green) and once to Pangnirtung, located on Baffin Island and renowned for its master printmaking and weaving communities. While at Pangnirtung, she also travelled to Cape Dorset, located on Dorset Island right near the southern tip of Baffin Island, a place mythologized since the 1950s as a centre for Inuit art-making, especially printmaking, drawing and carving.

As artist-in-residence for six months at Pangnirtung, Robins was able to witness first-hand the Inuit artists at work in their studios. She was especially impressed by how resourceful the people were in the face of a shortage of working materials the rest of us take for granted. She describes the way in which artists will, for instance, create a mock-up for a large piece of weaving on a very small sheet of butcher paper and then create the finished piece through the simple, but incredibly complex process of direct translation from eye to hand; no computers, no projectors, just the human ability to physically expand the small into a work of art, both vast and beautiful.

Robins speaks too about the spirituality of the people, most notably during feast times. She says that before slicing into the raw meat with their ulus (the traditional curved blades used for cutting), there were long and elaborate prayers offered, giving the people an opportunity to truly feel gratitude for the food provided to them, and she says that, unlike our wasteful tendencies here in the land of plenty, everything given was eaten. About the friends she made in the Arctic she says, "They are lovely. We hear so much about alcohol and drugs and suicide, but when you go and stay with the people, you see they are strong and resolute. The kids stand tall. They are friendly, they're happy, they're wonderful."

"Starry Starry Night" (Arctic Series), Jenn Robins, collagraph



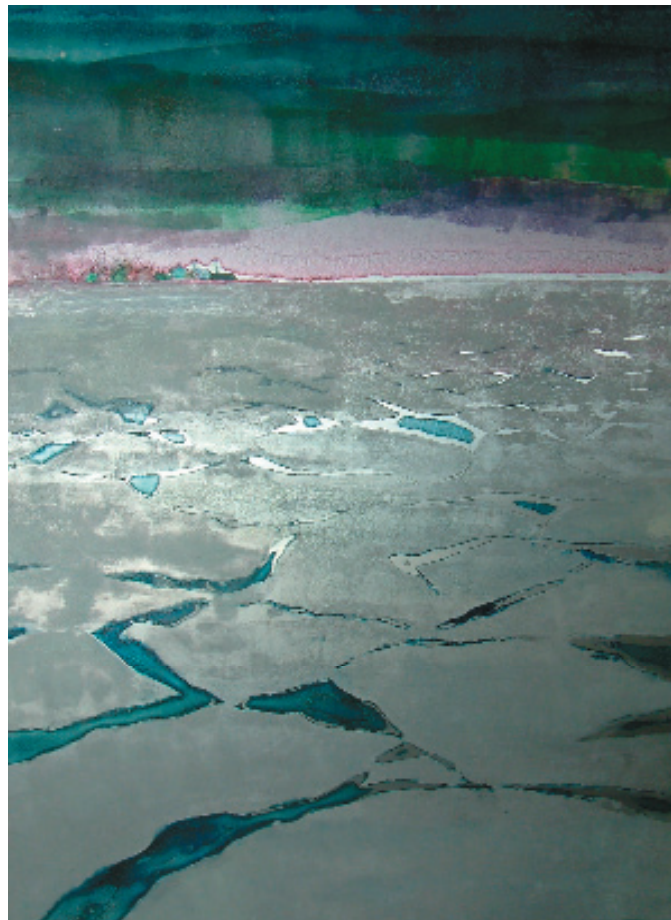


From November 17-20 at the Sculpture Studio, Robins will be exhibiting many of her recent prints in a group show—called *Fresh Off the Press*—with several of her former students (now her fellow artists). These prints, inspired by her Arctic adventures, tell the story of the land and the sky and the sea. She only saw “the northern lights once, but the memory was incredible.” So was the revelation that the people who live under those skies for all of their lives “don’t ignore the beauty” either, and this is evident in her work, this awe-struck love for the theatrical but profoundly real landscape which exists, for most of us, only in our excited *National Geographic* imaginations.

Since 1994, Robins has taught art, conducting private workshops and guiding students at various schools, including Vancouver Island School of Art, Victoria College of Art, UVic and Pearson College. An award-winning artist who holds a BFA from UVic, Robins is particularly knowledgeable about the discipline of printmaking. She is only too happy to whirlwind me through a stack of printmaking examples, showing me embossing, collagraph, photo etching, ink collage, folio graph, etching, intaglio and waterless lithograph, as well as several using her own innovative technique.

Robins began experimenting with this last process, metal monotype, as she calls it, in 1995, and she is bemusingly closed-mouthed about

“Jonasee’s Dream” (Arctic Series), Jenn Robins, monotype



“Tuktoyaktuk Across the Harbour” (Arctic Series), Jenn Robins, monotype

how the images are created. Essentially she is printing colour onto and embossing shapes into thin metal plates, usually copper, aluminum or zinc, creating several overlapping layers of pattern and colour both on and in the surface of the plate. She mentions a secret additive used to retard any possibility of oxidization, which sometimes makes the process tricky to complete, but won’t divulge any specifics.

These pieces are especially lovely; the metal shimmers through gaps in the ink creating a slight suggestion of space behind the surface, or more poetically, as Robins describes it, a whisper. The metal sends out little flicks of light, darting out at you as you pass by, as you look; creating a little silent noise, making you look. It seems a perfect representation of the Arctic as I imagine it: the Earth, a translucent curve filled with glowing light, covered in and surrounded by translucent coloured shapes and textures; even in the darkness, white on light continues endless.

*Fresh Off the Press opens (with food, wine and music) November 17, 6-8pm, and runs to November 20, 11am-4pm daily at the Sculpture Studio, 211 Harbour Rd Victoria. Other artists are: Kelly Dabous, Nancy Murphy, Melanie Furtado, Leigh Peirce, Cara Makkinga, Sam Mann. See [www.jennrobins.com](http://www.jennrobins.com).*



Christine Clark is an artist and writer currently at work on a series of zombie dolls for Halloween. Read more about Christine and art in general at <http://artinvictoria.com>.