

I AM A HAPPY OWL:

The Graphic Art of Kenojuak Ashevak

By

E. J. Guarino

Even when she was well into her eighties, Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak (usually simply referred to as Kenojuak) continued to produce powerful images that were always fresh and surprising. Her unique vision made her one of Canada's most important contemporary artists whose work is sought after by museums and collectors worldwide. Her body of work ranges from highly stylized representational pieces to the delightfully surreal. In Kenojuak's fantastical world an owl can be blue, a swan pink, a polar bear yellow, a fox bright red, a goose literally golden, and a fish can even have leaf-like fins. Because of her emphasis on composition, relying on placement of imagery, fluid lines, the use of positive and negative space and the interplay of colors and shapes, rather than a strict conformity to reality, Kenojuak's art can be appreciated by anyone for its utter beauty and requires no knowledge of Inuit culture. Kenojuak Ashevak's art is about happiness - the sheer joy of living. She did not explore the darker aspects of life. It should be noted that it was extremely rare for artists of Kenojuak's generation to do so and the same was true of the generation that followed. It was not until the third generation that a wide range of Inuit artists began to explore controversial subject matter. Kenojuak, instead, gives us vibrant works that make the viewer feel happy to be alive.

Early on in my collecting all I knew of this artist were her prints of fantastical birds but I was told by a staff member at the now defunct Isaacs/Innuity Gallery in Toronto that this was merely a small part of her artistic output. Wanting to learn more, I was directed to contact the Art Gallery of Ontario which I did. Explaining that I was a teacher and beginning collector, I was graciously allowed time in the Inuit portion of the museum's storage area and assigned a volunteer who brought out two carts loaded with drawings. As we went through them one by one we marveled at the range of subject matter - landscapes, scenes of life as it was once lived on the land, and images of animals other than birds - that were unfamiliar to us. Although prints are the most well-known aspect of her output, Kenojuak produced hundreds of rarely seen drawings that would be considered atypical by those only familiar with her print work. In recent years, however, a number of drawings produced by the artist have been made available to a wider range of collectors. This may have to do with the current interest in Inuit drawings, something that was not always the case.

When I first started collecting Inuit works on paper in the mid-1990s I couldn't fathom why one of a kind drawings were relatively inexpensive compared to prints, which were usually produced in multiples of fifty. It was the same staff member at the Isaacs/Innuity Gallery who explained that, overwhelmingly, prints are based on drawings but not all drawings are used for this purpose. Those that are not selected are usually archived. However, some were released to galleries for sale. Over the years, thanks to farsighted gallerists such as Pat Feheley, owner of Feheley Fine Arts in Toronto, and Judy Scott Kardosh and Robert Kardosh of the Marion Scott Gallery in Vancouver, the

market has changed. They helped build a base of collectors who not only have an avid interest in Inuit drawings but in some cases collect them exclusively.

Until I learned the range of Kenojuak's art I had no particular interest in acquiring examples of her work, mistakenly believing that it consisted solely of extravagantly imagined birds with feathers that seemed to explode out of their bodies in a riot of color. As my knowledge increased so did my fascination with Kenojuak's graphics.



***Spirit* Kenojuak Ashevak, Inuit, Cape Dorset, pencil, colored pencil, and pentel, 10" x 13" (1996-97). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

Ironically, *Spirit*, the first work I acquired by Kenojuak, employs the image of a bird. What attracted me to this drawing was that, although it was small, it was powerful. The piece's ambiguity was also intriguing. Exactly what kind of spirit is this? Is it the

spirit of a particular bird? Perhaps it is the spirit that watches over all birds. Then again, it occurred to me that the drawing might be about transformation - a bird in the process of becoming human or a shaman becoming a bird. From a purely visual perspective, *Spirit* is appealing because of the artist's muted use of color, the tactile quality of the black and gray employed to create the body of the creature and because it's tone is otherworldly.



***Deep Blue Sea* by Kenojuak Ashevak, lithograph & stencil on Arches cover grey paper, 19/50, Cape Dorset, 30"h x 44½"w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #13 (2003).**
Donated from the Collection of E. J. Guarino to the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College in 2007 in honor of Amanda Caitlin Burns.

Four years passed before I acquired another work by Kenojuak but it was large and spectacular. As a print, the details of *Deep Blue Sea* are so crisp, the colors so rich that it can easily be mistaken for a drawing. Blue is the overriding color, which gives the piece a serene quality. Standing in front of this unusually large print, the viewer is immersed in a watery undersea fantasy populated by clams, conches, two large fish blithely swimming by and a burst of yellow in the top middle of the page that may represent a starfish or, perhaps, the sun. As a work of art, *Deep Blue Sea* made such an impression on me that a year later I purchased three prints by Kenojuak and I have been buying her work ever since.

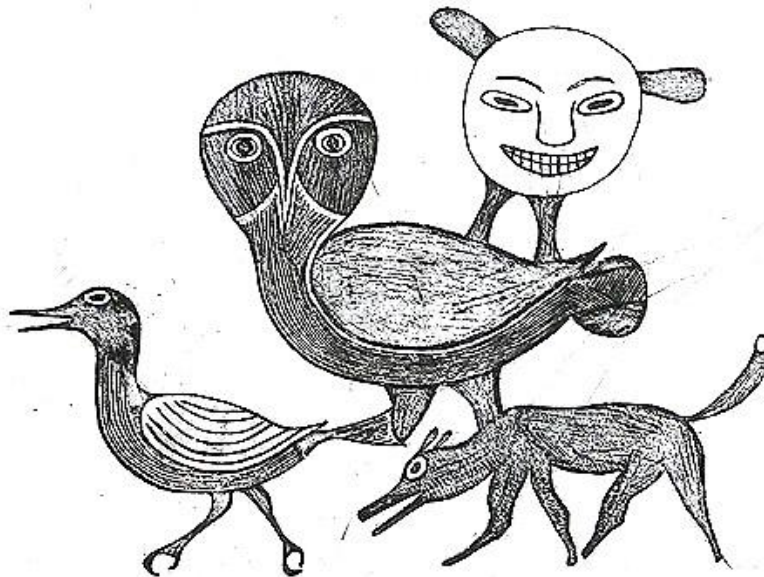
For collectors of Inuit prints the highpoint of the year is the Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection, which is released to the public each October. I became such a fan of Kenojuak's art that since 2004 I have bought one, sometimes two of the artist's prints from each year's collection. In the first year of avid acquisition I purchased two prints from the annual collection and another from the early days of Inuit print making.



***A Fine Catch* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching & Aquatint on Arches white paper, Printer: Studio PM, 39/50; Colors: blue, green, red, brown, black, beige; Inuit, Cape Dorset; Paper size: 19”h x 20”w; Plate size: 12”h x 12”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 10 (2004). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

I was drawn to *A Fine Catch* by the wide-eyed owl that looks boldly out at the viewer, something many of Kenojuak’s birds do, and by the work’s subtle humor. The owl’s expression seems to be one of surprise, as if the bird with the snake in its beak was somehow able to get what should rightfully have been the owl’s meal. How the animals are placed on the page creates a tension that elicits the work’s humor. The interplay of soft colors and the sensuous quality of the shapes the artist employed produced a print that is also visually beautiful.

During this same time period I came to the conclusion that there was a “hole” in my collection of Inuit prints because it contained no early works. Fortunately, the Arctic Artistry Gallery had a number of these early prints and, with the guidance and encouragement of owner Elaine Blechman, I began to acquire them.



**Untitled work by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching, ed. 22/50, Cape Dorset, Paper size: 12”h x 17½”w;
Plate size: 8½”h x 11¼”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #30 (1962).
Collection of E. J. Guarino**

An untitled etching by Kenojuak from 1962 immediately caught my attention because of its resemblance to *A Fine Catch*. The imagery consists of an owl, a fox, another bird that is most probably a goose, and a walking head, a strange being from Inuit folklore. This head with arms and legs appears to be standing on the owl’s back and it is only this odd creature and the owl who look directly out from the page, confronting the viewer. Although the animals in the print would be familiar to the artist, this work was clearly never intended to be a simple representation of Arctic wildlife. The

two figures that boldly meet the viewer's gaze evoke a dreamlike quality, especially since one of them is a disembodied head.



***Ravens Entwined* by Kenojuak Ashevak, lithograph on Arches cover cream paper, Printer: Pitseolak Niviaqsi, 39/50; Colors: blue, purple, yellow, orange, pink, brown, black; Inuit, Cape Dorset, 2.5”h x 30”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #11 (2004).**

Collection of E. J. Guarino

Quite a number of Kenojuak's prints are decidedly strange. *Ravens Entwined* is one of her most spectacular works in this vein. Consisting of a group of disembodied raven's heads whose exaggerated necks are entwined, the print is unique among Inuit graphic art. Rather than portraying the birds' natural black coloration, Kenojuak chose to create a rainbow of ravens on a white page by employing blue, purple, yellow, orange, pink, brown, and black. This adds to the surrealism of the piece.



***Iqalutsiavak (Beautiful Fish)* by Kenojuak Ashevak, stonecut & stencil on Osaki Seichosen kozo paper; Printer: Qiatsuq Niviaqsi, 38/50; Colors: green, blue, orange, yellow, burgundy; Inuit, Cape Dorset, 26”h x 32”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #11 (2005). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

Kenojuak manipulated reality in quite a different manner in *Beautiful Fish* in which one bold image is placed in the center of the page, something that is commonly done in Inuit prints. Here, however, the animal appears to be sensually swimming down the paper, its body forming an S-like shape. The yellow, orange and burgundy of the fish’s body blend together, adding to the work’s visual appeal. The creature’s elongated, balloon-like fins are akin to the opulent feathers of Kenojuak’s fantastic birds.



***Roaring Wolf* by Kenojuak Ashevak, pencil crayon & ink & pencil, Inuit, Cape Dorset
20"x26" (2003 – 04). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

Roaring Wolf is a completely different approach to representing the natural world. In this work, the animal is neither rendered in a completely realistic style, nor is it abstracted. Once again, using a muted palette Kenojuak creates a wolf that is ferocious but charming, appearing to be more the type one might encounter in a folk tale rather than in reality. Certain aspects of the wolf such as its nails and teeth are stylized and its mouth is highlighted by the use of red. The beast's fur is drawn in such a way that it has a tactile quality. The wolf appears to be sly and on the prowl. However, the title of this work is puzzling since *roaring* is not a word or action that is usually associated with wolves. *Howling* or *growling* would be more appropriate but the reason for the use of an inexact word might be a simple one. When Inuit prints are sent from the Arctic co-ops where they are produced most are titled, though a few are not. The opposite is true of

drawings. Most arrive at galleries as untitled works and some galleries simply choose to sell them as such; other galleries, sometimes in consultation with the artists, may decide to title the drawings they have received to make them more marketable. Whether or not this was the case with *Roaring Wolf* is unknown but it is a possibility.



***Spotted Loon* by Kenojuak Ashevak, lithograph on BFK Rives cream paper; Printer: Pitseolak Niviaqsi; 36/50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 28"w x 22"h, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #9 (2006).
Collection of E. J. Guarino**

For sheer visual splendor, it would be hard to surpass Kenojuak's *Spotted Loon*, one of the most glorious Inuit prints ever produced. Although I can be termed an animal lover, I am particular in the extreme about the type of wildlife themed art that enters my collection. Photo realistic depictions don't appeal to me and anything that even hits at sentimentality is immediately rejected. As soon as I saw *Spotted Loon*, however, I instantly knew I wanted to acquire this print. The bird is identifiable as a loon but

Kenojuak has played with coloration, using a steel blue tone and posing the animal against a light burnt sienna background, making the image extremely appealing.



***Out From The Night* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching & aquatint, 33/50; Inuit, Cape Dorset, 33" x 42", Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #15 (2000). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

Out From The Night was a revelation to me. One day in 2007 I was visiting Elaine Bleckman at her Arctic Artistry Gallery and, as I walked in, I stopped talking halfway through my greeting and stood frozen, staring at this spectacular print. I had never seen anything like it and was surprised to learn that it had been produced by Kenojuak Ashevak. The creatures in the print were certainly not realistic and their amorphous bodies, looking very much like blobs you might see in a lava lamp, seemed

to glow with an inner light. Placing the imagery on a background of subtle shades of black, Kenojuak creates her figures using only two colors: turquoise and gold. One of the animals appears to be an Arctic fox, another a bird and two others may be a rabbit and another bird while one of the strange beings has what appears to be a human head. The visual ambiguity of the work gives the print its surrealistic quality.



***Long Necked Loon* by Kenojuak Ashevak, lithograph; Paper: BFK Rives tan; Printer: Pitseolak Niviaqsi, 36/50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 30" h x 41.5" w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 16 (2008).
Collection of E. J. Guarino**

I always say that collecting is a process and this is certainly true of my acquiring works by Kenojuak Ashevak. Although I was more attracted to other aspects of the artist's graphic art than to her famous birds I finally came to appreciate them and felt that the collection should have at least one example of a Kenojuak bird with fabulous feathers. I saw a print that I liked in the 2007 Cape Dorset Print Collection but Elaine

Blechman, the mentor for the Inuit part of my collection, told me “That’s not the one.” I trusted her judgment and expertise but worried because I would have to wait another year for a chance at a bird by Kenojuak and there was no guarantee that, even then, I would find “the one.” Sure enough, in the fall of 2008 Elaine showed me *Long Necked Loon* and we both agreed that this was the piece to add to the collection. As soon as I saw it I thought it exquisite and still do. As with her earlier *Spotted Loon*, this is not a mere slavish representation of Nature. Kenojuak is not a realist and here she turns the bird into a fantastical creature. The loon’s feathers are composed of muted tones that evolve into bright colors that are more striking because of the print’s tan background and the placement of the bird against it. The artist presents the loon in a flowing, sensuous manner that suggests life and movement.



***Sunlit Ravens* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching & aquatint; Paper: Arches White; Printer: Studio PM, 38/50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 35.5”h x 40”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 10 (2009).**
Collection of E. J. Guarino

Usually I view the works from the Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection online and then drive about a half hour to the Arctic Artistry gallery to view them in person and discuss the merits of each one with Elaine Blechman. I arrive with my choices based on what I have seen on the Internet, but seeing them in reality always changes the mix. This was especially true of *Sunlit Ravens* which I spotted as I was about to leave the gallery. “I don’t remember seeing this,” I said. “It positively glows!” I had, of course, seen this print on my computer but it had made no impression on me because the print’s incandescent qualities do not translate well to a photographic image. If I had not seen the work in person I would not have purchased it. The variety of yellow tonalities in the print are so mesmerizing that it is hard for a viewer to look away. Once again, Kenojuak has given us her own unique perspective on reality since ravens are black. Here we see the birds through the eyes of the artist. Their bodies have been hit by the short-lived and much welcomed sunlight of the Arctic summer. Rather than realistically portraying the color of the ravens, Kenojuak uses light to suggest how the Arctic comes bursting to life with the arrival of the sun after the long darkness of winter. Seeing this print in person, the viewer can’t help feel as if he or she is being bathed in sunlight.



***Animals Out Of Darkness*, signed Kenojuak Ashevak, but known to be the work of her husband Johnniebo Ashevak (1923-1972), Cape Dorset, stonecut on paper, 5/50 , 19½" x 21¾" (1961). Ex-collection of Honorable Mark M. de Weerd, Chief Justice, Northwest Territories, Canada.**

Collection of E. J. Guarino

The importance of light and shadow should not be underestimated in Kenojuak's work. It is especially important in *Animals Out of Darkness*, a work that has stylistic similarities to *Out From The Night*, a work produced thirty-nine years later in 2000.

Complicating my misconceptions about Inuit graphics was the fact that for many years the only early prints I had seen were black-and-white etchings and engravings which gave me a rather distorted view. This changed when, in 2010, I saw *Animals Out of Darkness*, which was produced in 1961. The use of color by artists just learning the possibilities of the print medium, which had only been introduced to Cape Dorset in the late 1950s, is stunning. The animals emerge from darkness, seemingly rushing forward into light, giving the work a surreal rather than representational quality. Clearly, this

work is not “primitive” by any definition of the word. I was amazed that artists who only recently had been introduced to the complexities and technical challenges of printmaking could produce such a visually arresting work.

Not part of any of the annually-released Cape Dorset print collections, the creation of *Animals Out of Darkness* involves a bit of a mystery. The staff of the Marion Scott Gallery in Vancouver, where I purchased the print, had heard that it was Johnniebo, Kenojuak’s husband, who was responsible for the piece, but that it was signed *Kenojuak* because she was already quite famous, making the work marketable. However, Inuit photographer Jimmy Manning told the staff of the Marion Scott Gallery that it is believed that both Kenojuak and Johnniebo worked on this piece (a collaborative effort). Since Kenojuak already had a well-established reputation, it was decided to sign it solely under her name.



***Young Bird in Flight* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching, aquatint, sugar lift & hand painted by Beatriz Sobrado Sámano, 31/50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 30½”h x 40½”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 13 (2010). Collection of E. J. Guarino**

The 2010 Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection contained a number of fascinating prints by Kenojuak but I was immediately drawn to the inherent humor of *Young Bird in Flight* – a young bird suddenly finding himself in mid air and freaking out. I was also intrigued that a non-Inuit had hand painted each print (something that had never been done before) as well as by the use of the sugar lift process. I had no idea what the term *sugar lift* meant so I contacted Patricia Phagan, the Phillip and Lynn Straus Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Loeb Art Center, Vassar College who said in an e-mail that it was an aquatint process. She went on to explain that “. . . you brush a

design on the [printing] plate using a sugar solution. Let the plate dry. Coat the plate in varnish. Then soak the plate in water. The sugar will swell and lift the varnish off the plate. These exposed areas are then covered with an aquatint powder and bitten in acid. The resulting little pits in the plate will hold the ink when printed. The process creates an effect of brush like strokes.” The sugar lift technique certainly adds to the visual beauty of the piece by lending it a painterly quality and enhancing the blue and gold tones employed by the artist. Kenojuak’s humorous perspective on Nature lends a special dimension to her work. Seeing young birds attempting to fly is something she would commonly experience in her Arctic homeland but Kenojuak allows us to see it through her eyes.



***Sun Sister* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching, aquatint, sugar lift & hand painted on Arches paper, /50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 31½”h x 40½”w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 11 (2011).
Collection of E. J. Guarino**

As quoted in *Landmarks of Canadian Art* by Peter Mellen (McLelland & Stewart, 1978), Kenojuak stated, "I am an owl, and I am a happy owl. I like to make people happy and everything happy. I am the light of happiness and I am a dancing owl." This philosophy is evident in all of her work, but especially in *Sun Sister*. Looking at this print the viewer can't help but feel a sense of joy. The central image is a smiling, yellow and white sun. Like rays, eight birds emanate from it. Although it may not, at first, be obvious, Kenojuak has once again drawn on the realities of her Arctic environment to create a work that is not quite representational. The arrival of the sun after the long Arctic winter heralds a time of plenty for both humans and animals. Birds are

particularly dependent on the season of light, coming by the millions to the Far North from thousands of miles away to mate, raise their young and then fly south again. Some species feast on the abundance of fish while others avail themselves of the vast swarms of mosquitoes that appear at this time of year. With great subtlety Kenojuak suggests the relationship between the sun and, not only birds but, all living creatures.



***Raven's Proposal* by Kenojuak Ashevak, etching & aquatint on Arches White paper; Printer: Studio PM, 30/50, Inuit, Cape Dorset, 26.25"h x 25.5"w, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection # 7 (2012).
Collection of E. J. Guarino**

During the Arctic spring and early summer the land and the air come alive with millions of birds seeking a mate. The males often perform elaborate courting dances, bobbing their heads, hopping about and displaying their feathers. In *Raven's Proposal* Kenojuak captures just such a moment - a male bird offering a spectacular display of his plumage to impress a female. The use of the word *proposal* in the print's title lends a human quality to the birds, suggesting that the methods they use to attract a partner are not really all that different from those employed by humans. Beyond the work's subtle and sly humor, it is striking visually. The gradations of hue, the perfect placement of the two birds on the page and the exquisite feather's of the male make *Raven's Proposal* one of Kenojuak's most beautiful prints.

For art lovers and collectors worldwide, Kenojuak Ashevak's prints are the face of Inuit art and of contemporary Canadian art as well. Though famous for this work, Ashevak produced art in a variety of other media such as drawing and sculpture and also created designs for stained glass and textiles. Age did not diminish Kenojuak's creativity and her work continues to inspire younger generations of Inuit artists. In Canada she is an artistic icon and national treasure.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Kenojuak Ashevak who died on January 8, 2013.

