

Tradition Lost, 1996, David Ruben Pigtoukun, Sutton (Brazilian soapstone, slate;  $4.5 \times 30 \times$ 5 in). 4ρ'-6" Δρος", 1996, CΔδ የለ° ለናጋፊ°, ५ር°

In this work from Piqtoukun's solo exhibition Between Two Worlds, the artist confronts the impact of gradually lost practices, languages, and lifeways as a result of colonialism in the Arctic in the 20th century. This abstract work, like a dying swell, is a powerful mnemonic for the deprivation of culture experienced throughout the North. This and the other sculptures Pigtoukun created for the exhibition, demonstrates how art provides both a forum and a frame of reference for the critical examination of the impacts of colonization. These works also illustrate how artmaking can be creatively utilized to preserve and fortify threatened cultural knowledge and practices through either the depiction of Inuit cultural knowledge or just in the act of carving itself.

#### BY HEATHER IGLOLIORTE

ncreasingly, art made by Inuit reveals the remarkable resilience with which they are responding to the many changes that threaten their cultural practice. While completing curatorial research for the Legacy of Hope Foundation exhibition, "We were so far away": The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools, I became interested in investigating how Inuit artists have engaged with the legacy of residential schools, which were expressly designed to effect cultural change. Although only a small number of artworks specifically address being a student in a residential school, there is a sizeable and growing body of art that deals with and critiques the entangled impacts of nearly a century of colonialism and aggressive religious proselytizing in the Arctic. This flourishing subgenre of contemporary Inuit art gives valuable insights into the impact of European culture in the Arctic during the mid-20th century. It also reveals the tremendous grace, humour, and resilience with which Inuit artists are challenging that colonial legacy.

As defined by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, resilience is the capacity for communities, families, and individuals to spring back from adversity more fortified and resourceful despite decades of societal stressors.<sup>1</sup> It relies on the adoption of such "mature defenses" as humour and altruism. On the societal level, cultural resilience is cultivated or maintained through the revival and celebration of aboriginal beliefs and practices, which strengthen the collective capacity to withstand negative forces from within and without. It is my conviction that the making of art, a consistent and positive practice in many Canadian Arctic communities over the past 60 years of social upheaval, has been an important factor in supporting Inuit cultural resilience.

#### Converging Impacts of Colonization in the North

Before the introduction of the residential school system, northern cultural practice had already been significantly eroded by the incursion

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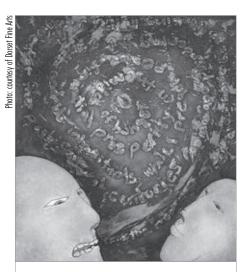
## Markers of Cultural Resilience

of European culture. Aboriginal communities in southern Canada had undergone several centuries of intensifying Western European colonization and missionary involvement, but Inuit communities were relatively unaffected by outside contact until the early 20th century. Within only a few decades, however, the precontact way of life underwent dramatic changes. Inuit were "settled" into communities created around trading posts, often leading to the over-hunting of wildlife in the immediate area and an increasing dependence upon preserved food and packaged goods imported from the South (Mitchell 1993:336). Such diseases as smallpox and tuberculosis spread quickly throughout these new settlements. In Nunavik and Nunatsiavut, several Inuit communities were entirely relocated; the consequences were devastating since the relocated populations often lived in overcrowded and difficult conditions (Tester and Kulchyski 1994; Dussault and Erasmus 1994; Brice-Bennett 2000).

Christian missionaries had been despatched across the Arctic and Subarctic in the late 19th century and much earlier in Nunatsiavut but it was not until the 1910s and 1920s that great numbers of Inuit converts were made. Conversion was usually to the Catholic or Anglican faiths and sometimes occurred in advance of missionary involvement (Tungilik and Uyarasuk 1999). To save their souls, missionaries prohibited Inuit converts from practicing spiritual customs and cultural traditions, believing that these were heathen and savage rituals (Norget 2008:222).

It was in the midst of this cultural turmoil that residential schools were introduced across the North with the rationale that they would be "the most effective way of giving children from primitive environments experience in education along the lines of civilization leading to vocational training to fit them for occupations in the White man's economy" (National Archives of Canada 1954: part 7). Inuit children were taken

from their homes in large numbers and forced to learn a foreign way of life at the expense of their own. The northern Federal Day School system, the government residential school system for Inuit, housed students in adjacent dormitories and hostels; sometimes, they were boarded with families in the small communities. The dormitories housed anywhere from 8 to 250 students at a time (King 2006:1-2). Prior to 1955, fewer than 15 per cent of schoolaged Inuit children were enrolled in residential schools; within a decade, this number climbed to over 75 per cent (ibid.,10). Many parents also relocated in order to be near their children, forcing families into permanent settlement. As artist and author Alootook Ipellie wrote in his 1992 essay, Nunatsiagmiut: People of the Good Land, parents moved to communities to provide support for their children so that they could learn, but in reality "they were relinquishing their authority and status



New Age Christ, 2008, Jutai Toonoo, Cape Dorset (etching and aquatint; 24.4 x 22.4 in). Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. 上ので、 もこトアンア、 2008、 マム こっ、 やしム<sup>c</sup>

Some artists have begun to use their art to question the dual impacts of colonization and evangelization in the Arctic, creating bold new works that critically examine the legacies of this intercultural encounter. In New Age Christ, Toonoo condemns what he sees as the duplicity of Christianity, inscribing on the work: "I am the new age Christ and I have been lurking in the shadows for the past several centuries raping and plundering the earth and its inhabitants while I preach peace [and] financial prosperity in the midst of hunger."

by turning their children over to teachers who taught whatever they wanted. As a student, I learned about the *Qallunaat* world, but nothing about my culture or my language" (p. 19).

At that time, the federal government's expectation was that schooling would enable Inuit to find employment in southern Canada (King 2006:10). And, indeed, many students were grateful for the education they received.<sup>2</sup> However, as we now

those responsible for their care. The deleterious effects of the residential school system on the health and well-being of survivors and their families were evident everywhere in the communities and were compounded by converging impacts of colonialism in the North.

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## Nonetheless, while Inuit culture was being debased, devalued, and actively oppressed by the dual forces of colonization and evangelization, these same values were revered, celebrated, and voraciously collected in their arts

know, many also suffered greatly as young students and grew up to be traumatized adults. As Ipellie told us, Inuit children were forbidden to speak their own language or practice any aspect of their culture in the schools, dormitories, hostels, and other residences. Since assimilation relies on the adoption of the dominant language — in this case, English or French — the prohibition on traditional languages was often strictly enforced by harsh punishment (1992:19). The children were often made to feel ashamed of their way of life, and many developed disdain towards their parents, their culture, their centuries-old practices and beliefs, and even the country foods provided by their families. Furthermore, many were physically, mentally, and sexually abused by

celebrated, and preserved in their art, which was voraciously collected. Concurrent with the devastating cultural impacts sweeping the Arctic, contemporary Inuit art debuted on the global art scene to critical acclaim and was supported by the Canadian public, the modern art market, and the government (Vorano 2007). Although Inuit now sometimes complain that they are not free to make whatever kind of art they want, they, in fact, enjoy the artistic freedom of practicing their culture in a way that subverts the otherwise dominant colonial authority. And the income they receive from this activity has the further effect of affording them a measure of independence from their paternalistic custodians.

Perhaps it was more significant that Inuit were being asked to depict their pre-contact and, in many cases, now forbidden cultural practices in stone and, later, on paper and in textiles. Artists could illustrate the stories their elders had told for millennia as well as the indigenous knowledge bestowed on them by their ancestors, the animals they had studied since childhood, and the way of life they had so recently lived. The subject matter of artwork may have held a different, more romanticized meaning for the purchasers of Inuit art than it did for the makers, but as long as the Inuit knowledge, stories, or practices portrayed had not been distorted or falsified to make the art more saleable, this work could both appeal to a Western audience and serve as an expression of Inuit knowledge and cultural resilience.

In fact, many artists are still motivated to make art about what life was like before colonization. For example, in spite of using art production as his primary source of income, stone sculptor Uriash Puqiqnak says he has another motivation: "When I carve, I try to convey what it was like for Inuit in the early 1940s" (Mitchell 1991:12). Similarly, graphic artist Mayureak Ashoona has said of her work, "These are all about history — what has been going on. They are memories; the whole truth about all of life for those who forget about their history; to make sure that the young people know what really happened; to work both sides, from the past to the future; to communicate with people in the South because I can't speak English. I am proud of that lifestyle - my Inuit life" (Feheley 2001:14).

#### **Daring New Directions in** Social Critique

In recent years, some daring artists have stepped outside what had become a conventional framework for Inuit art to provide us with some divergent perspectives on the transformation of the North. This new work, uncommon and introspective, is a significant departure from the typical imagery of past decades, but I think it serves similar ends: to strengthen from within a culture threatened by dominant outside forces and to examine the way of life as Inuit know it. Forerunners such as Napachie Pootoogook and Kananginak Pootoogook created great bodies of autobiographical and historical works examining their communities during this critical period of transition. Today, as the third and fourth generation of Inuit artists emerge, the possibility of remembering a pre-contact and unmediated lifestyle becomes less likely, and the artwork is shifting to reflect this reality as well.

The movement towards depicting the encounter between Inuit and Westerners began in the early 1960s, with a handful of artists who experimented with work that went beyond the prescribed boundaries of "Inuit art." Pudlo Pudlat, the most prominent figure in this early history, combined Inuit transformation iconography with modern transportation technologies, depicting colourful airplanes, ships, and helicopters. While Pudlat most often conveyed his impressions of Euro-Canadian culture with humour and whimsy, he, along with others, also tackled the more serious matters of Western religion and Inuit belief systems in his work. Pudlat's stonecut and stencil print, Shaman's Dwelling (1975), which depicts a cross above a



The Last Goodbye, 2001, Abraham Anghik Ruben, Salt Spring Island (Brazilian soapstone). Prof-criss *(ペኦ>∩'ъ್*\*, 2001, ላ∆ペ∟ዘላ ላጭ >ለ°, ነዖየነርΓ

In this heartbreaking work of vivid clarity, the artist recalls witnessing his mother's pain as she sent her two older children to residential school. Ruben is one of the few Inuit artists who have dared to examine directly the impacts of residential schooling on survivors, and this work is a reminder that the trauma of separation was not experienced only by children who were taken to the residential schools, but also by parents and siblings who were left behind.



Untitled, 1991, Manasie Akpaliapik, Ikpiarjuk (whale bone, Brazilian soapstone, shell; 16.7 x 12 in). 406かつ\*, 1991, Lar מילכם אי, שיא מילי

In this untitled piece, Akpaliapik has fearlessly depicted the relationship of alcohol to negative self-image and abuse, a subject that few Inuit artists have been brave enough to tackle. The artist has captured the pain of alcoholism with startling clarity in this mixed materials sculpture, through the simple and courageous metaphor of a bottle breaking through the head of its victim. Alcoholism, as one of the selfinjurious coping mechanisms that is sometimes resorted to by victims of trauma and abuse, is one of the legacies of residential schooling and colonization.

snow house, is a shining example of the ingenuity and resilience of Inuit culture. Inuit frequently - and somewhat subversively — coped with the influx of Christianity through the syncretistic amalgamation of new and old beliefs, adopting the new religion on their own terms (Gibson 1998). More recently, artists such as Suvinai Ashoona and Jutai Toonoo have also critically examined religion in their artwork; in New Age Christ (2008), Toonoo condemns what he sees as the duplicity of the Church, inscribing on the work, "I am the new age Christ and I have been lurking in the shadows for the past several centuries raping and plundering the earth and its inhabitants while I preach peace, financial prosperity in the midst of hunger."

It is not surprising that many other Inuit artists have also elected to address the impact of such cultural stressors as the incursion of southern television, coerced settlement into arbitrary communities, and the disruption created by residential schools. Oviloo Tunnillie, reflecting on her personal experience with the removal from her home to be treated for tuberculosis, which ravaged many communities in the mid-20th century, created This has Touched My Life (1991–92). The sculpture depicts the day veiled nurses came to take her away to the southern sanatorium where she lived for a year, isolated from her family. Her illustration of the foreign appearance of the agents of her dislocation provides the viewer with a vivid sense of the fear and alienation she must have experienced. Similarly, Annie Pootoogook's body of work touches on themes ranging from the insidious influence of such trashy television programs as

Jerry Springer to the fallout of spousal abuse and alcohol dependency. Manasie Akpaliapik's well-known untitled mixed media sculpture from 1991 — featured on the cover of IAQ Winter 1993 — intertwines a variety of complex issues by examining the relationship of alcohol to negative self-image and abuse through the simple, courageous metaphor of a bottle emerging from a broken head to confront the viewer with frank self-representation.

These emergent, socially conscious works are indicative of the increased ability of Inuit to reflect upon and respond to the multiple pressures of contemporary life. This new approach to Inuit art, involving the illustration of trans-cultural processes and the Inuit experience of the contemporary world, seems to be accelerating and now includes remarkably sensitive and even more nuanced social commentary and critique. There has been a noticeable shift over the last two decades to the depiction of daring, intercultural subject matter (as demonstrated in the work of Mike Massie, Toonoo Sharky, Floyd Kuptana, Jamasie Pitseolak, Shirley Moorhouse, and many others) and what is, hopefully, a growing body of work that directly calls into question the legacy of trauma and colonization in the Arctic. Such bold statements are novel to Inuit art, but they indicate the artists' willingness to begin the difficult process of self-examination and their desire to rebound from adversity more fortified and resourceful: the essence of resilience.

To date, this resilience and selfreflexivity around the residential

Photo: Emest Mayer, Winnipeg Art Gallery

school experience has nowhere been more evident than in the work of brothers Abraham Anghik Ruben and David Ruben Piqtoukun. These two artists have poured their memories and emotions into their work, from which we can learn much about the power of self-expression to heal and fortify.

Becoming an artist was the catalyst for self-healing for Ruben. In a 1991 interview with Sonia Gunderson (2005:18–25), he recalls the 11 years he spent dealing with the legacy of residential schooling. His life changed when he began professional training with Alaskan Inupiaq created 62 works for the exhibition, with such titles as Bearing Wounds (1995), Angst (1995), and Tradition Lost (1996). Taken together, these works expose the complexities and difficulties of cross-cultural translation, and provide the viewer unmitigated access into Piqtoukun's traumatic past and his continuing effort to strike a balance between two worlds. One of the most powerful messages of Inuit cultural resilience is manifested in The Ever-Present Nuns (1995), of which Pigtoukun has said, "The four faces pointing in four directions represent the all-seeing nuns. They attempted to watch over

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artist, Ron Senungetuk, a professor at the Native Arts Centre at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. "For the first time in years, I felt at home," he said (p. 20). Since then, he has created several bold works of social critique. Kittigazuit (1999-2000), for example, is an abstract narrative of a community decimated by foreign disease; The Last Goodbye (2001) depicts vividly Ruben's recollection of his mother's pain as she sent her two older children to residential school.

The Winnipeg Art Gallery's solo exhibition, Between Two Worlds: Sculpture by David Ruben Pigtoukun (1996), was a revelation for artist and audiences alike. Piqtoukun

and control the Inuit children in their school, even to control their inner lives. But the nuns could not see everything. They were blind to the owl spirit hovering directly above them" (Wight 1996:24).

The tremendous efforts of these brothers have given us remarkable insight into the potential of artmaking as a tool for resisting colonization, asserting cultural resilience, and strengthening the Inuit voice. In fact, all of the artists mentioned in this essay have shown us that art can be creatively utilized as a vehicle to preserve and fortify cultural heritage, and as an instrument of both personal and collective healing. However, in this period of nationwide awareness



The Ever-Present Nuns, 1995, David Ruben Piqtoukun, Sutton (Brazilian soapstone, Italian crystal alabaster, African wonderstone, Arizona pipestone;  $14.7 \times 5.4 \times 5.7$  in). Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, gift of John and Sheena Cowan. (Loがことり) *ዾታህላ*ና, 1995, ር∆ልና ?∧° ለናጋժ°, ५ር°

One of the most powerful images depicting the resilience of Inuit children in residential schools is Pigtoukun's The Ever-Present Nuns. The faces of the nuns looking in four directions is a representation of the way the nuns tried to oversee and regulate every aspect of the children's lives. As Pigtoukun said: "They attempted to watch over and control the Inuit children in their school, even to control their inner lives. But the nuns could not see everything. They were blind to the owl spirit hovering directly above them" (Wight 1996:24). Pigtoukun has captured the spirit of the children who, in spite of paternalistic attempts to assimilate aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian culture, survived the schools and now actively work to heal its personal and collective legacies.



Kittigazuit is an abstract narrative of a seasonal whaling site on the Mackenzie River where hundreds of Inuvialuit used to gather every year. Around the turn of the 20th century, epidemic diseases brought by foreign whalers and traders spread throughout the community killing hundreds of people at this culturally significant site (Alunik, Kolausok, and Morrison 2003:89). Ruben has created a work about the devastating impact of foreign diseases in Inuit communities. His sculpture serves as a public memorial for the loss of a community. The act of commemoration is a reminder of the resilience of Inuit cultures in the face of destructive outside forces.

of the residential school legacy, the artwork of Inuit, First Nations, and Métis people can play another important role: the power of visual art to speak across linguistic, cultural, and generational divides presents an opportunity for artists to tell these stories to a broad audience and to support the continued strengthening and revitalization of the national reconciliation process.

#### **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> The Aboriginal Healing Foundation utilizes Stout and Kipling's description of resilience, which is most often defined as "the capacity to spring back from adversity and have a good life outcome despite emotional, mental, or physical distress... the adoption of 'mature defenses' (i.e., humour and altruism) can help individuals overcome a lifetime of adversity, whereas anti-social or self-injurious coping strategies can aggravate existing risk factors and conditions ... the resurgence of Aboriginal beliefs and practices, accompanied by traditional resilience promotion strategies, has given rise to promising interventions" (2003:iii-iv).
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, in addition to being grateful for the education they received, some Inuit consider themselves fortunate to have benefitted from artistic training while attending residential school. This enabled them to cope with isolation from their families and influenced their decision to become artists in their adult lives. It further illustrates the fortifying effect that artmaking can have on the resilience of its practitioners.

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Shaman's Dwelling, 1975, Pudlo Pudlat, Cape Dorset (colour stonecut and stencil on laid Japanese paper; 24 x 33.7 in). Gift of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1989. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto, Ontario. 4% a 45%. 1975, < > > c\_c, P\*LAC

This print by Pudlat is a daring depiction of syncretism: the amalgamation of Christian religious practices with Inuit spiritual customs (Gibson 1998). In Shaman's Dwelling, Pudlat shows respect and understanding for both new and old beliefs by incorporating the two spiritual practices into a single image, portraying the shaman in a cross adorned igloo, flanked on either side by arctic birds. The syncretistic coalescence of Inuit spirituality with Christian practices helped Inuit cope with the increased pressures caused by a rapid shift to a new religion.

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1996 Between Two Worlds: Sculpture by David Ruben Piqtoukun. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery. Heather Igloliorte, a PhD candidate in Cultural Mediations at Carleton University, is the curator of "We were so far away...": The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools. This essay was adapted, by the author, from a chapter in Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey, which was published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in 2009. It is reprinted here with the permission of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.