ASHOONA, Shuvinai  (b.1961 Cape Dorset, Northwest Territories)

As the daughter of Kiawak and Sorosiluto Ashoona - who have been active in the arts for over five decades - as well as the grand-daughter of renowned artist Pitseolak Ashoona, it should have been no surprise that Shuvinai would someday take to art-making. When her first images appeared, however, they were completely unexpected. She began drawing in 1993, encouraged by Jimmy Manning then the manager at the Kinngait Studios. Because of her painstaking drawing process, it took several years to develop a body of work substantial enough for exhibition. Although two small etchings were included in the 1997 annual Cape Dorset print collection, it is the exhibition Three Women, Three Generations in 1999 that marks her emergence in the public eye.1 Her drawings of this period were hermetic landscapes, partly realistic in their intricate details of the topography around Cape Dorset and partly fantasy in elements such as stairs that emerge as land formations yet lead nowhere. As landscape views, largely devoid of human activity, these drawings were in sharp contrast to other Cape Dorset artists as well as in their unusual introspective quality. Constructed through built-up layers of dark tones, they seem to mirror an interior world as much as illustrate an exterior one. In 2001, the National Gallery acquired six drawings, dating from 1994 to 1998 of which one, Rock Landscape (NGC40568) was featured in the CBC radio series All in a Day (One Treasure at a Time) with Brent Bambury in 2003.

Despite the radicalism of her work already at this early stage, Shuvinai did not gain immediate attention beyond Inuit art circles but quietly continued to develop her interests and style with the encouragement of Manning, Bill Ritchie and her cousin Annie Pootoogook. More recently she has increasingly had work included in exhibitions such as Drawing Restraint along with Shary Boyle, Royal Art Lodge, Basim Magdy (SAW Gallery, 2006), Ashoona: Third Wave Shuvinai Ashoona, Siassie Kenneally and Annie Pootoogook (Art Gallery of Alberta, 2006-2007), Shuvinai Ashoona: Drawings 1993-2007 (Marion Scott Gallery, 2007), and Stadthimmel – CitySky with John Noestheden (Illingtonworth-Kerr Gallery./Basel Art Fair, 2008). In 2009, she has work in four exhibitions Shuvinai Ashoona (solo, Carleton University Art Gallery), Contemporary Traditions with Annie Pootoogook (Galerie Pierre-François Ouellette), Noise Ghost with Shary Boyle (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery), and at the National Gallery, Uuturautit: Cape Dorset Celebrates 50 Years of Printmaking (16 October 2009 – 17 January 2010).

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Christine Lalonde, Acquisition Proposal for Shuvina Ashoona’s Untitled (Eden), accession #42917, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.
