



impressions

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GETTING INUIT

WHAT DO YOU THINK WHEN YOU HEAR "ESKIMO"? Igloos? People in parkas and mukluks? Whale blubber? Once you see *Contemporary Inuit Art*, at the Gallery of Art at Johnson County Community College, you'll gain a new perspective.

The exhibition presents 40 prints and eight sculptures, each of which was created during a period of transition in the lives of the Eskimo (who call themselves Inuit, meaning "the people.") As one of the last nomadic hunter-gatherer cultures, the Inuit have a 4,000 year history of tracking migratory animals across the tundra of North America. They lived much as we imagine them; they built snow igloos in winter and skin tents in summer. However, everything began to change for the Inuit in the 1950s, as the arctic's strategic importance during the Cold War brought government personnel up from the United States and Canada. The contact with the Western world put into motion changes which transformed the culture. They began to settle around the military bases. Traditional hunting wouldn't feed their growing population. They needed new ways to support themselves as they adjusted to life in a modern world.

In the 1950s, artist John Houston introduced the Inuit to drawing and printmaking as a means of gaining economic independence. He was captivated by the spirit of their religious carvings, and felt there was a market for Inuit art in the Western world. Houston helped the Inuit set up workshops where they could create plates and prints of drawings collected from people in the village—most of whom had never drawn before. The prints were sent to the West, where they were purchased by eager collectors who were hungry for their simplicity and life.

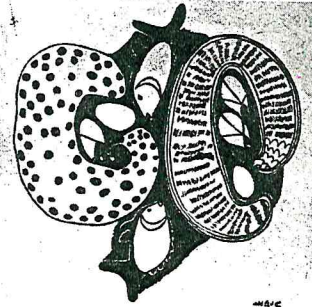
The prints are simple, with stark white backgrounds and vibrant colors. The sculptures take advantage of the spirit of the stone from which they are carved and possess an

inherent beauty and balance of form. Regardless of medium, the works draw from the inner thoughts of this transforming culture, capturing both everyday moments and mythological beliefs in the crisp, clean prints and smooth stone.

The print "A Man Making a Kayak and A Woman Making Clothes" depicts a traditional division of labor. The artist, Levi Qumaluk, ignored the basic tenants of optical depth and perspective and layered the groundlines. The resulting image is easy to follow and delightfully balanced. At the base of the picture we see the side-view silhouette of a woman as she sews a parka. Her work is seen from an aerial view, making it easy to identify. The man is on a higher but parallel ground line; he too is shown as a side-view silhouette. The kayak is shown from above, and the fire he is stoking is seen head-on, introducing a third viewpoint into the composition. This may sound like a confusing mishmash, but the image is well balanced and delightful to explore.

Most notable are the eight sculptures arranged throughout the gallery. "Bird Carrying Rabbit to Heaven" embraces both mythology and nature in its small, triangular form. The bird's wings embrace the rabbit, whose ears nest into the bird's throat. The enmeshment of the two animals implies the interdependence and balance in nature with an economy of line and plane. "Face with Bird and Seal" changes depending on your point of

view. From one angle, it is the face of a person, from another it is a bird, and from a third it is the form of a seal. Such visual punning is common in Inuit art, and reveals the humor and delight the artists take in manipulating their medium. They seem to breathe life pieces like "Fish—Tail Up." The life-size fish balances on his front section while his tail curls into the air. The tension and balance equal one another in a form which



A stone cut entitled "Sea Urchins."

seems to freeze a moment in time.

The show is a pleasant opportunity to dissolve some old ideas about a little-known culture. We see how the Eskimos live today compared to their nomadic past. However, it does bring to mind the issue of exploitation. Why does the Western world prefer to consume more primitive cultures? What makes the artistic products of the Inuit (and other primitive and tribal cultures) so attractive to the West? Do we truly appreciate the work for what it is—visual images of a unique culture—or do we want to own a piece of something wild, untamed, quaint or primitive in order to prove our own superiority? Without the Western market for this artwork, the Inuit would have had to turn to something else to survive, so, in a way, the Western consumption is beneficial. But on the other hand, if the Western world had not moved in on their land, they would have continued as they did for 4,000 years before, tracking the caribou across the tundra and living in harmony with nature. ▲

"Contemporary Inuit Art" can be seen through July 19 at the Johnson County Community College Gallery of Art, located in the new Cultural Education Center at College Blvd. and Quivira.

Houston