

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Kenojuak

Jean BLODGETT

Firefly Books, Scarborough, 1985

256 pp., 160 colour, numerous b/w illus.,
\$49.95

Native art in general and Inuit art in particular, has become immensely popular in Canada over the last two decades. Various reasons account for this phenomenon: the material being produced is now linked to a dynamic and (on the whole) effective distribution system whereby works done by geographically isolated creators are being moved to areas of dense population. Also, this marketing system is providing new income for creators at a time when more traditional socio-economic systems are being eroded. Successful marketing has promoted a considerable increase in the number of creators and in the volume of works they produce. Over the last twenty years or so, a new awareness has developed of the very real plight of Canadian native peoples and, most importantly, of the detrimental role European immigrants have played in this cultural crisis. A certain guilt exists. This guilt, of course, is tinged with romanticism for non-natives have a certain vicarious longing for a more elemental existence, for a life based on and derived from the land. The longing extends to cultural traditions as well. Here we see the Inuit with a highly developed, complex system of mythic beliefs, something European Canadians lack, as Northrop Frye has noted. For all these reasons, then, native art has now gathered attention never before accorded it.

However, evidence of this attention has been strangely absent in most critical and analytical Canadian writing. Catalogues

relating to native exhibitions are usually restricted to biographical and descriptive comments. The reasons for this have to do both with the developmental state of Canadian criticism and with ignorance of native artistic goals. Canadian critics, struggling to find a footing, have concentrated on material both geographically and culturally closer to hand. (The virtual absence of native critics is an unfortunate given.) Two writers, George Swinton and Jean Blodgett, are noteworthy exceptions. Frequently independently and at times together, Swinton and Blodgett have attempted to create means of analyzing and interpreting Inuit art for non-Inuit. Blodgett's *Kenojuak* is the most successful effort to date.

Part of the success of this book is due to a judicious choice of subject. *Kenojuak*'s images, especially her prints, seem to contain those very attributes which buyers seek. They meet what the German aesthetic analyst Hans Robert Jauss calls the "horizon of expectation,"¹ the sum total of reactions and prejudices that a viewer brings to bear on a work. The "horizon of expectation" a European Canadian typically brings to an Inuit art work is frequently romantic and is frequently based on prejudice, on ignorance. Southern Canadians often consider Inuit "primitive" people and expect their art, a non-Inuit concept itself, to be redolent of primitive characteristics. Inuit art, it is supposed, is stylistically naive, featuring simplified, flat and decorative forms and thematically based on mythic or quotidian primitive subjects. *Kenojuak*'s prints appear to fit this definition.

From the point of view of style, this opinion has validity as *Kenojuak* has had

very little art instruction. Consequently, she is not concerned with the historically important elements of perspective, atmosphere, moral value, and the like. Her prints are composed of simplified planes, forms derived from nature but unrestricted by the concept of exact reproduction of natural objects.

Where the primitive or naive label is indeed incorrect is in Kenojuak's themes. Because much of native culture involves myth and interchange with nature, we tend to read Kenojuak's themes in those terms. This is wrong. Blodgett tells a revealing story about the late Kathleen Fenwick repeatedly asking Kenojuak about the significance of owls in her work. Not about to be trapped, Kenojuak replied that she was just trying to "make something beautiful, that's all" (p. 37). Owls and other birds are not important in either spiritual or documentary terms. Devoid of mimetic concerns, Kenojuak has no interest in recording the specifics of species, pattern, or habit. Many of her birds are not a specific type but are of her own invention. Furthermore, although birds are a popular shamanic subject in Inuit art, Kenojuak's are not grounded in broad cultural myths. As Blodgett has ably demonstrated, Kenojuak is not interested in subject matter; her real interests lie in form and colour.

Here, surely, we have an interesting example of what Craig Owens calls the allegorical impulse.² Owens sees allegorical impulse as appropriated imagery; he feels that the allegorist confiscates rather than invents images. The allegorist, laying claim to the culturally significant, poses as interpreter so that the image becomes something different, something new altogether. The allegorist does not restore an original meaning, but rather adds another meaning to the image. Kenojuak, working with popular

Inuit subjects, including human faces, animals and birds, reinterprets these images. Yet the southern viewer's "horizon of expectation" is such that often the original meaning, rather than Kenojuak's new meaning, is perceived. Wanting to read Inuit works in a romantic, primitive light, southern viewers pass over her new meaning, her formal concerns. This misreading assumes greater poignancy when one acknowledges that Kenojuak's real interests are precisely those which southern viewers have found so difficult to confront in the work of southern creators. Kenojuak's primary concern with form is not recognized by viewers who are seeking their own myths, perhaps partially, by appropriating Inuit ones for themselves.

The value of Blodgett's book, then, lies in its recognition of this misreading. By building up an impressive array of biographical and social facts, Blodgett puts Kenojuak's creative development into an historical and sociological perspective. The textual recording of biographical details and aesthetic analysis is complemented by the rich presentation of her prints. All prints done before 1980 are reproduced here, in excellent quality, in colour. This exceptional amount of colour was possible because this book is a popular edition of the costly limited edition produced in 1981. Of particular interest in the analysis of Kenojuak's prints are the comparisons presented between the original drawings and the final prints. Blodgett thus demonstrates graphically the extent to which Kenojuak's original vision is transformed by the printers and the print-making techniques. Would that Kenojuak's sculpture had received the same treatment. Just why her sculpture is so neglected (it is mentioned, along with her other media, in one short chapter) is never made clear.³ Also, Blodgett might have

clarified and sharpened her formal analysis. These small points notwithstanding, *Kenojuak* is the best book I know on an Inuit artist and her art. May we have many more.

Ann Davis
Freelance Curator
London, Ontario

Notes

¹ Hans Robert JAUSS, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 1982).

² Craig OWENS, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Post-modernism," *October*, 12 (Spring, 1980), pp. 67-86.

³ We are told in a footnote on page 76 that the intent of this book is to document Kenojuak's prints, not her sculpture or drawing that does not relate to her prints. It seems a pity to have relegated to second place these features of her work, and not to have considered her oeuvre as a unit.