

IRENE AVAALAAQIAQ: MYTH AND REALITY. By JUDITH NASBY. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. ISBN: 0-7735-2440-1. xiv + 130 p., colour and b&w illus., map, bib., index. Softbound. Cdn\$32.95.

The book commemorates Baker Lake artist Irene Avaalaaqiaq's receipt of an honorary doctor of laws (LL.D.) degree from the University of Guelph on October 19, 1999. To honour the artist, the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre of Guelph commissioned three wall hangings and six drawings for its collection. Author Judith Nasby, director of the Centre, has illustrated these in her book, which in effect becomes the catalogue for this collection. Nasby is obviously a staunch supporter and great admirer of Avaalaaqiaq's work, having nominated her for the honorary degree.

This volume is lavishly illustrated, with 27 colour plates of wall hangings and drawings, as well as 24 photographs (16 black-and-white and 8 in colour) and a map of the Kivalliq region. The photographs are mainly of Avaalaaqiaq and her family, with some historic and ethnographic shots.

For the person interested in Inuit art, *Myth and Reality* makes for easy, informative, and extremely interesting reading. When I first saw the book, I expected it to be just about Irene and her artwork. However, it has heavy historical and ethnographic content, which one could argue was needed to contextualize the art of Avaalaaqiaq.

Irene's formative years were spent in the geographic centre of Canada, an area so remote and isolated that she never encountered any *qallunaat* (white people) until she was fifteen. The *qallunaat* and his culture were worlds apart from the nomadic subsistence lifestyle of Avaalaaqiaq and other members of inland Inuit groups. Likewise, for an urban southerner, the entire Arctic experience is so foreign that it is virtually incomprehensible. It was necessary therefore for the author to introduce her audience gently to the kaleidoscope of Inuit experience. Hence the references to and quotations from Rasmussen, Harrington, and Birket-Smith, whose writings about this land formed much of our early knowledge of the Kivalliq or central region of the Arctic. A genealogy would have been a welcome addition, since at times it gets somewhat confusing trying to follow the various relationships. If Nasby's objective is to educate and introduce the wider public to the richness and diversity of Inuit art, this approach was necessary, and she has adeptly and admirably succeeded in her task.

Compared to the Baffin Inuit, who had considerably more and earlier contact with both the Hudson's Bay Company and the missionaries, the Inuit in the Baker Lake area have retained much more of their traditional belief system. The relationship between man and animals, the power of shamanism, and the concept of transformation as seen in Avaalaaqiaq's work characterize her unique style. In the catalogue for an exhibition at the Marion Scott Gallery in Vancouver, entitled *Two Great Image Makers from Baker Lake*, Robert Kardosh (1999) aptly refers to Avaalaaqiaq's work as "theatrical":

An Avaalaaqiaq wall hanging feels not unlike a theatrical production complete with expressive colour and dramatic light-and-dark contrasts, almost a controlled choreography, a good deal of stagey posturing on the part of many of the figures, and frequently silhouetted choruses of bobbing heads around the often darkened edges. (p. 9)

One can readily understand this stylistic precedent. The stories that formed the basis of Irene's image repertoire—the transformation of ptarmigan into humans, for instance—were those she heard as a child. Her grandmother told her the stories, usually at night, when the dark period was returning. In the light of the *qulliq*, the traditional stone oil lamp, shadows would be cast and figures would be silhouetted against the sides of the tent or snow house.

Irene Avaalaaqiaq is an extremely prolific artist. Although she also draws and carves and has made numerous prints, using techniques such as stencil, relief, intaglio, and lithography, her primary medium of expression is fabric. She is renowned for her wall hangings, constructed with shapes cut from felt or wool stroud, a woven fabric, and sewn onto a backing of either stroud or duffle, a heavy, coat-weight woolen fabric. Details are embroidered using various colours of embroidery floss. Technically her usage of material is very ingenious and economical. Her borders are cut from a single piece of fabric: they are not joined. Smaller borders are then cut from leftover pieces of fabric, as well as other shapes, which she applies to her negative space (background). Her use of colour is dictated by what is available locally.

What I find particularly interesting is that her wall hangings are brightly coloured and composed dramatically. She has a preference for red, orange-yellow, black, and white. However, in direct contrast to the bold graphic images of her wall hangings, her drawings are very delicately rendered using coloured pencils, and almost whimsical in their use of a pastel palette — violet, light grey, pink/red and pale blues, yellows, browns, and blues. Yet somehow they both work: she manages to maintain the integrity of each medium.

It is ironic that Irene is most renowned for her wall hangings, since she lacks confidence in her sewing skills. Nasby quotes Irene's words about sewing traditional clothing:

I used to have a hard time sewing because I was never taught to sew. I still don't know how to make a pair of kamiks (caribou skin boots) and an outfit of caribou skin ... so Tiktaalaaq [her husband] and I never did have any good clothing because of my incapability to sew. (p. 10)

Avaalaaqiaq's manner of working and the speed at which she produces her wall hangings—as well as her drawing technique, which renders the pencil lines extremely lightly, with the least amount of physical effort—militate against the painstaking endurance required in the making of traditional clothing. It is this economy of effort and simplicity of image that distinguish her from her

counterparts. The mental state and discipline needed to produce the laborious, meticulous, painstaking stitchery required for the making of watertight *kamiks* (boots) are not evident in Irene's work. Yet that work pattern is also perhaps her strength. By being so fast and prolific, she has been able to convey a sense of spontaneity and playfulness to her images. She has very adeptly compensated for her lack of traditional skills. She is fortunate, in that she has been able to use the narrative aspects of her traditional lifestyle in her images to survive and succeed in her transitional and present lifestyle! So what Irene has said about her lack of traditional sewing skills is extremely important and significant to her development and growth as an artist. Had she lived her life entirely on the land, and had her family been totally reliant on her sewing for survival, they might never have survived, and we might never have seen the richness of this particular artist's work.

Irene's productivity has also been bolstered by her daughter Nancy's involvement in the sewing process. This practice of employing others in the making of artwork when one has reached a certain level of fame has long been a tradition in western and eastern society, but for Inuit artists this is rare. I am aware of only one other Inuit artist, Nuna Parr, the famous carver from Cape Dorset, who has many people working for him. The problem arises, if indeed it is viewed as a problem, of distinguishing how much of a particular work was made by the artist. In Irene's case, however, the creative images are hers and hers alone. To my knowledge, Nancy (unlike her brothers, who are artists in their own right) does not engage in making art of her own.

Nasby assumes her readers' ready appreciation of Avaalaaqiaq's graphic style. However, I believe it takes a certain sophisticated and particular aesthetic appreciation to embrace her work. Avaalaaqiaq's body of work is very distinctive and recognizable. It is dramatic and despite its content, the stories and legends, it is schematized, possessing a stark simplicity and strength. I have found that people either love her work or do not. I have found this to be true of other Inuit art as well. Most people embrace artwork that tends towards realism. It is easy to "read," as it is straightforward and exactly what it purports to be. Work that has narrative content, with simple, but strange, almost hypnotic, figures in dramatic colours transforming themselves into something else, attracts those with catholic taste and a wide range of artistic appreciation.

For those who already have an appreciation of Inuit art but want to learn more about the art and people of the Kivalliq Region, I would highly recommend this book. For those who are just acquiring such an appreciation, such as new collectors, students or just interested parties, *Myth and Reality* is a must. The book provides a good insight into the life and work of a Baker Lake woman artist. Nasby has successfully compiled all the various and disparate information into a cohesive body, an extremely painstaking process. Her bibliography is also extensive, and the index and list of photo references help readers to find

specific material quickly. Both the quality and the selection of the visual material are excellent, and the layout and organization of the material, extremely professional. This book would make a welcome addition to any library.

REFERENCE

KARDOSH, R. 1999. Two great image makers from Baker Lake. Catalogue accompanying an exhibition of sculpture by Josiah Nuilaalik and wallhangings by Irene Avaalaaqiaq. Vancouver: Marion Scott Gallery. 56 p.

Kyra Vladykov Fisher
P.O. Box 54
Kimmirut, Nunavut, Canada
X0A 0N0
cedkimm@nunanet.com

ELEPHANT ISLAND AND BEYOND: THE LIFE AND DIARIES OF THOMAS ORDE LEES. By JOHN THOMSON. Bluntisham, Huntingdon and Norwich: Bluntisham Books and Erskine Press, 2003. ISBN 1-85297-076-6. viii + 330 p., map, b&w illus., bib., index. Hardbound. £24.95; US\$45.00.

With the recent upsurge of interest in Sir Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition on board *Endurance* (1914–17), which has manifested itself in books, documentaries, and feature films, the details of that expedition will be known to many readers. To summarize, the expedition sailed from England on board *Endurance* on 8 August 1914 with the aim of crossing Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. The ship became beset in the ice of the Weddell Sea on 18 January 1915 and was crushed and sank on 21 November. The entire ship's company (28 men) drifted north in a camp on the ice, until they took to three of the ship's boats at 72° S. After travelling northward some 110 km, they landed on barren, inhospitable Elephant Island on 15 April. The party improvised a shelter from two of the overturned boats, and on 24 April Shackleton, with four companions, set off to sail the third boat, *James Caird*, to South Georgia.

A theme common to most recent accounts of the expedition is that Thomas Orde Lees, a captain in the Royal Marines hired primarily to look after the expedition's motor transport (motor sledges and an aero-sledge), was the least popular member of the expedition. Having been put in charge of stores once the ship became beset and subsequently during the ice-drift, the boat journey, and the protracted sojourn on Elephant Island, Orde Lees kept the party on tight rations, and for this reason alone he was less than popular, especially among the crew. As the only serving officer in H.M.'s forces, he tended to be "on the outside," not fitting in well with any of the groups that