



Prospect 19:

Megan Kyak-Monteith

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Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here

Introduction

Exhibitions in the Prospect series introduce artists in the early phase of their careers. Typically their first solo exhibition in a public gallery with accompanying curatorial publication, the Prospect project provides an opportunity to create new work while practicing professional timelines and processes. MSVU Art Gallery is delighted to see Megan Kyak-Monteith's new work *Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here*, 2020, realized in this context.

In her graduate exhibition *Maqtaak*, at Anna Leonowens Gallery in January 2019, Kyak-Monteith presented a series of large format paintings that showcased the community involvement required to hunt and harvest a whale. I was struck by these canvasses, and the sophistication in her marriage of technique with storytelling. Executed in the vein of grand history paintings or social realist propaganda, her figures are relatable while foreign, and their labours are palpable. It was in *Maqtaak* that I first saw *Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here*, 2018. That imposing canvas drew me in like a perfectly captured snapshot of a Nunavut sky, deceiving in its beauty, hardly suggestive of the isolation, even the desolation a southerner of settler-colonial heritage like me would find in the Canadian North. With this work I knew that Kyak-Monteith warranted a place among Prospect artists that my predecessor, Ingrid Jenkner, had been nurturing since 1995, and that I had much to learn from this artist.

Initially, Kyak-Monteith and I talked about scale—in the studio she was exploring still life compositions and working small. Perhaps the possibility of going big would be the best use of this opportunity? When she showed me her experiments in animation, however, we could see the potential: using a stop motion technique of recording frame by frame the painting-on and wiping-off of oil paint on glass over a static background, she could show each part of a scene moving forward through time. Thus, the idea to make the *Whale Hunt* scene come alive, and over the course of a year, that's precisely what she did.



Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here, 2018
Oil on canvas, 152.4 × 226.0 cm
Private Collection

Whale Hunt: The Cut, 2018
Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 182.9 cm
Private Collection



About the Whale Hunt

Kyak-Monteith's paintings often combine images from her memory with stories shared by others. She works on these fantastic compositions from memory, altering the scale, perspective, and frame to suit the spirit of the scene. Composed from a few different perspectives in previous large paintings of her memory of subsistence hunting, the *Whale Hunt* scene approximates a real harvest that she witnessed in Igloolik in August, 2002: a bowhead whale, towed in by open-water hunters, is pulled ashore and parceled with the cooperation of the entire community, elders and children alike. In traditional Inuit form, the fruits of this labour are shared. The muktuk (or maktaaq, whale skin and blubber) is laid out on tarps for distribution, and the best part of the whale are given to elders.

The big picture of the event was essential in initial storyboards for the animation: backing up, and away from the whale, the animation would include not just a big whale but also big vehicles—trucks and bull dozers—and a big community pulling. Size and scale are highlighted in the way the whale must be carved from the top. The butchers must climb up and pull back body-sized sections. The real whale, still massive, was a female, 14.2 meters long.

The proposition in this scene is fantastic, and rightly so. Between 1999 and 2015, when the annual bowhead hunting quota for all of Nunavut was set at five whales, only one harvest was recorded in Pond Inlet, for example, where the artist is from. In 2019, one of five hunting tags was allotted to the community at Pond Inlet, and a bowhead was landed there on August 3rd after a three-day hunt. So rare and special is this occasion that the impossible size of the whale in Kyak-Monteith's animation is appropriate.

The people in the scene are tiny and move like specks. Mostly made up of only five or six brushstrokes, these abstracted figures stand in for anyone and everyone. When I asked Kyak-Monteith about the coming together of people for the landed whale and whether people knew how to do the work of processing the meat, she told me: "You wouldn't not show up. Everyone is going to share in the whale, so everyone goes to help." Even if these pushing and pulling movements are new to the bodies in this group, the communal memory of the work—the traditional knowledge passed through generations—provokes a muscle memory that one hopes might override systemic disempowerment and quell regional food insecurity.

Kyak-Monteith's *Whale Hunt* scene is enlightening. To talk about it, I must hear from her, as she hears from her Inuit community, about what it is really like to harvest a whale, to pull its flesh or wield an ulu. Kyak-Monteith has done the work for me, and other viewers like me, of creating an image so fanciful that my distance from the reality of subsistence hunting is impossible to ignore. I am grateful for this, and for the invitation the work offers to partake of community endeavor, if only that of sharing a story, and of bringing people closer together.

***Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here* 2020**

Video, 46 seconds

Courtesy of the Artist



Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here (detail), video still, 2019



About the artist

Megan Kyak-Monteith (b. 1997, Mittimatalik/Pond Inlet, Nunavut) graduated NSCAD University in 2019 with a BFA in interdisciplinary studies. As a finalist for NSCAD's 2019 Starfish Student Art Awards, she received an honourable mention for her painting *Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here*, 2018. Kyak-Monteith's work was installed at Nuit Blanche (Montreal, 2019) as a part of GLAM Collective's Memory Keepers I, and she was assistant curator for Memory Keepers II at Art in the Open (Charlottetown, 2019). Her work from Memory Keepers I was reinstalled at Inuit Blanche (Montreal, 2019) at 4th Space Gallery, Concordia University. She works as a freelance illustrator for children books and magazine articles and continues to paint from her home in Halifax.

"Cataloguing personal histories as representations of distant memories is important in my work, especially focusing on how they form and reform as they are recalled. Cultural observations made in my paintings come from my childhood memories growing up in Nunavut and Nova Scotia. These depictions of memories from childhood are saturated with exaggerations of scale and atmosphere, and much like with any memory, they are never exactly accurate to what is recalled."

– Megan Kyak-Monteith

Prospect 19: Megan Kyak-Monteith—Whale Hunt: I Think Everyone is Here.

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video still, 2019

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Exhibitions in the *Prospect* series are intended to give critical consideration to the work of selected artists during the early stages of their careers. The modest scale of these exhibitions encourages artists to develop their ideas and professional knowledge under minimal pressure. MSVU Art Gallery's aim of securing wider recognition for Nova Scotian artists is supported by Mount Saint Vincent University and the Canada Council for the Arts.