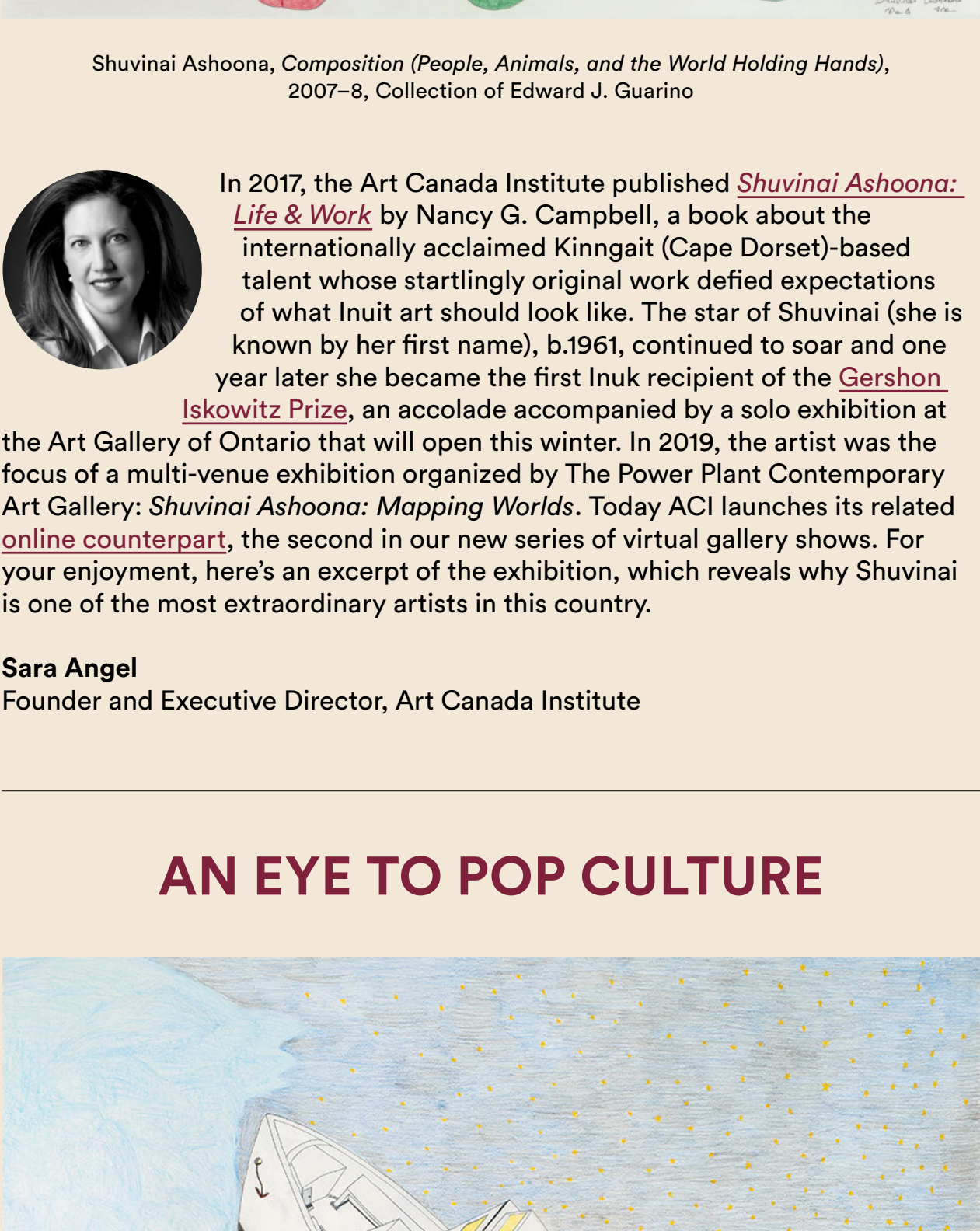


BRAVE NEW WORLDS SHUVINAI ASHOONA'S ART

Shuvinaï Ashoona has forged a fantastical, elaborate style of drawing by fusing Inuit tradition and Western popular culture with her extraordinary imagination. ACI's new online exhibition explores how her astonishing images of surreal settings and otherworldly creatures have made this Nunavut-based artist an internationally celebrated name.



Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Composition (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, 2007–8, Collection of Edward J. Guarino

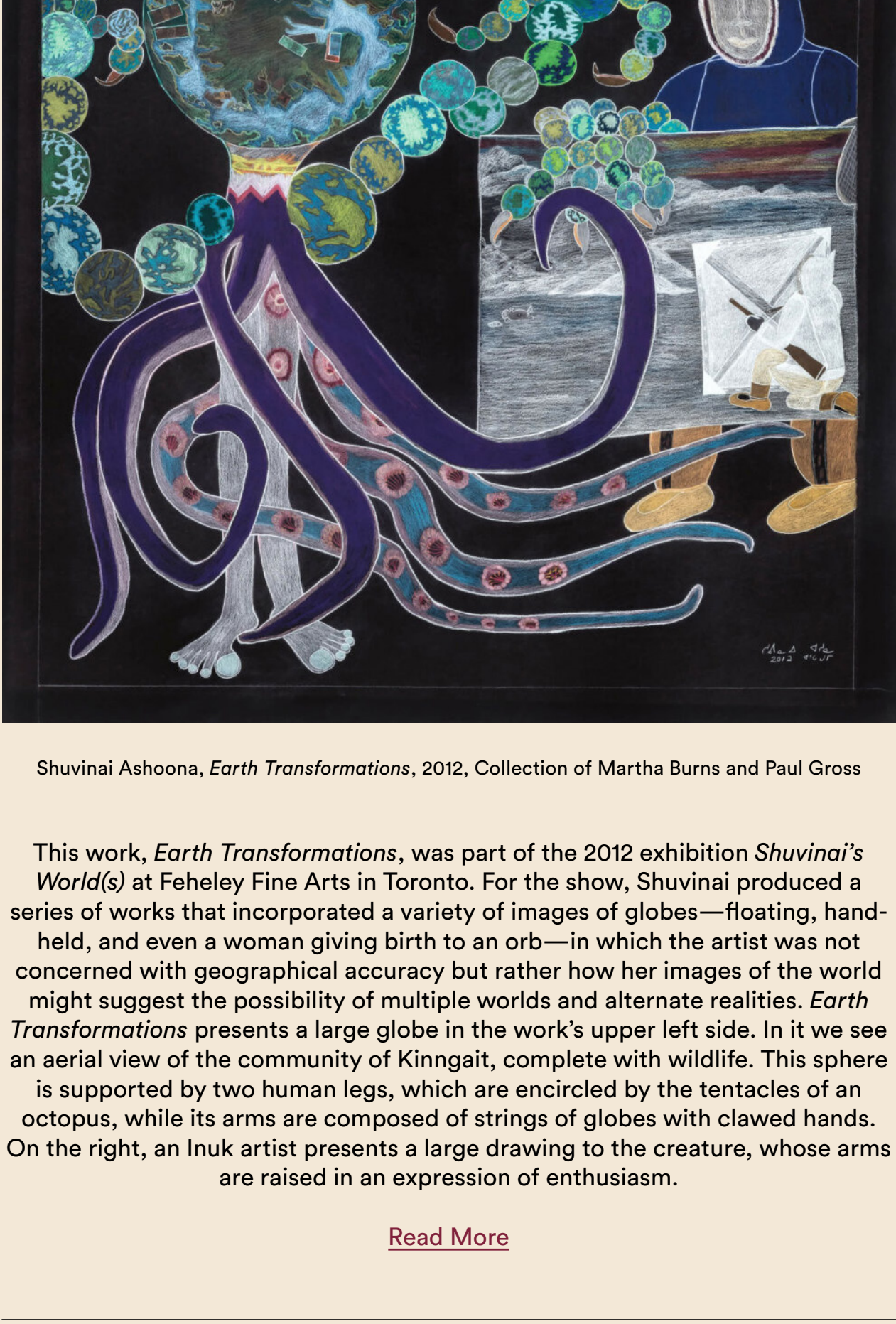


In 2017, the Art Canada Institute published *Shuvinaï Ashoona: Life & Work* by Nancy G. Campbell, a book about the internationally acclaimed Kinngait (Cape Dorset)-based talent whose startlingly original work defied expectations of what Inuit art should look like. The star of Shuvinaï (she is known by her first name), b.1961, continued to soar and one year later she became the first Inuk recipient of the [Gershon Iskowitz Prize](#), an accolade accompanied by a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario that will open this winter. In 2019, the artist was the focus of a multi-venue exhibition organized by The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery: *Shuvinaï Ashoona: Mapping Worlds*. Today ACI launches its related [online counterpart](#), the second in our new series of virtual gallery shows. For your enjoyment, here's an excerpt of the exhibition, which reveals why Shuvinaï is one of the most extraordinary artists in this country.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AN EYE TO POP CULTURE

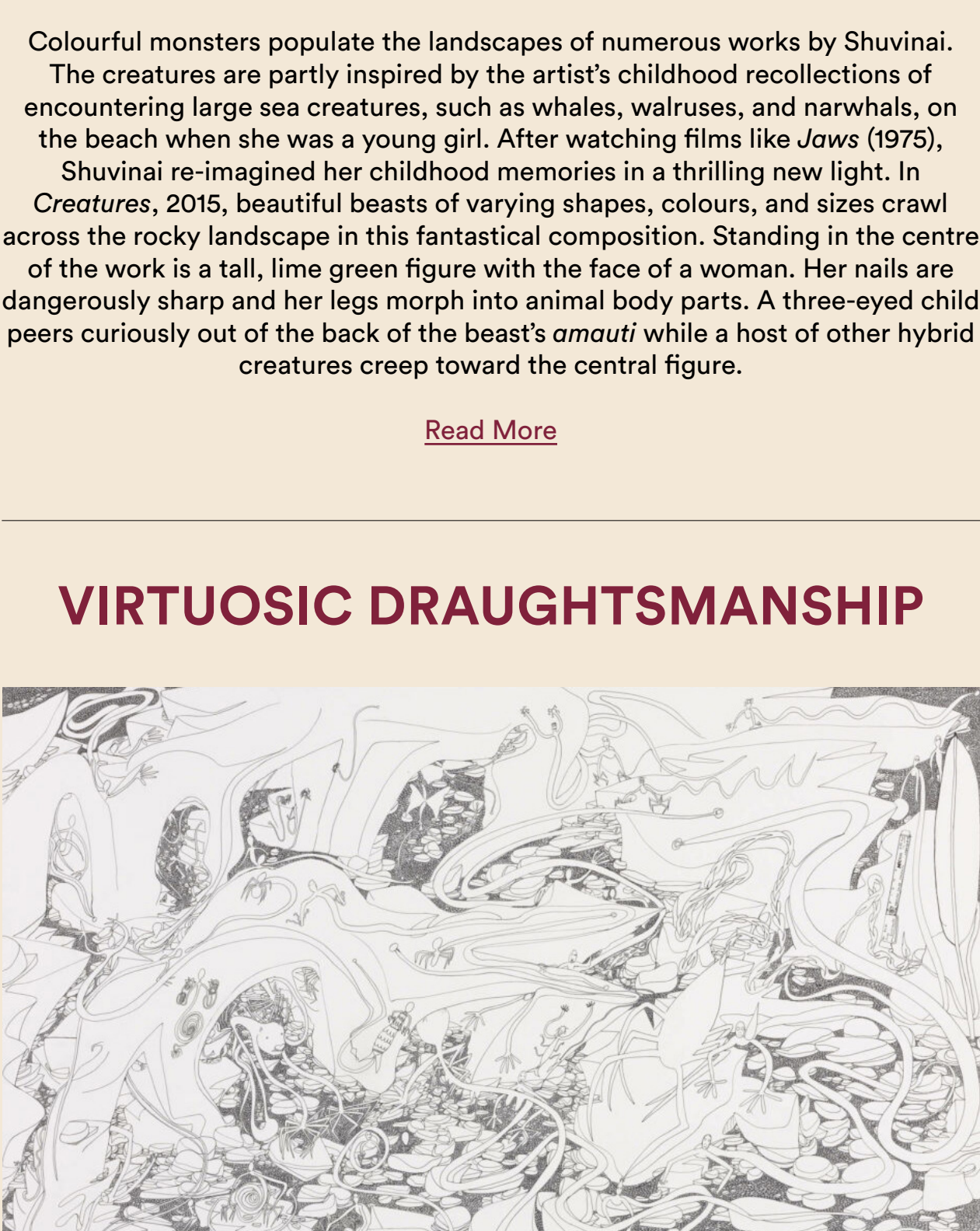


Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Sinking Titanic*, 2012, Winnipeg Art Gallery

Now 59 years old, Shuvinaï grew up in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset) with access to Western popular culture that she often brings into her art. This image of the infamous sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 was inspired by James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster film. In the dramatic work, Shuvinaï depicts scores of passengers plunging into the ocean as the ship tilts upward and the tremendous loss of life caused by this catastrophe. The film may have had a particularly poignant impact on Shuvinaï because of the sinking of the supply ship *RMS Nascope* in Kinngait harbour in the summer of 1947—a major event in the history of the community.

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ENVISIONING MULTIPLE WORLDS

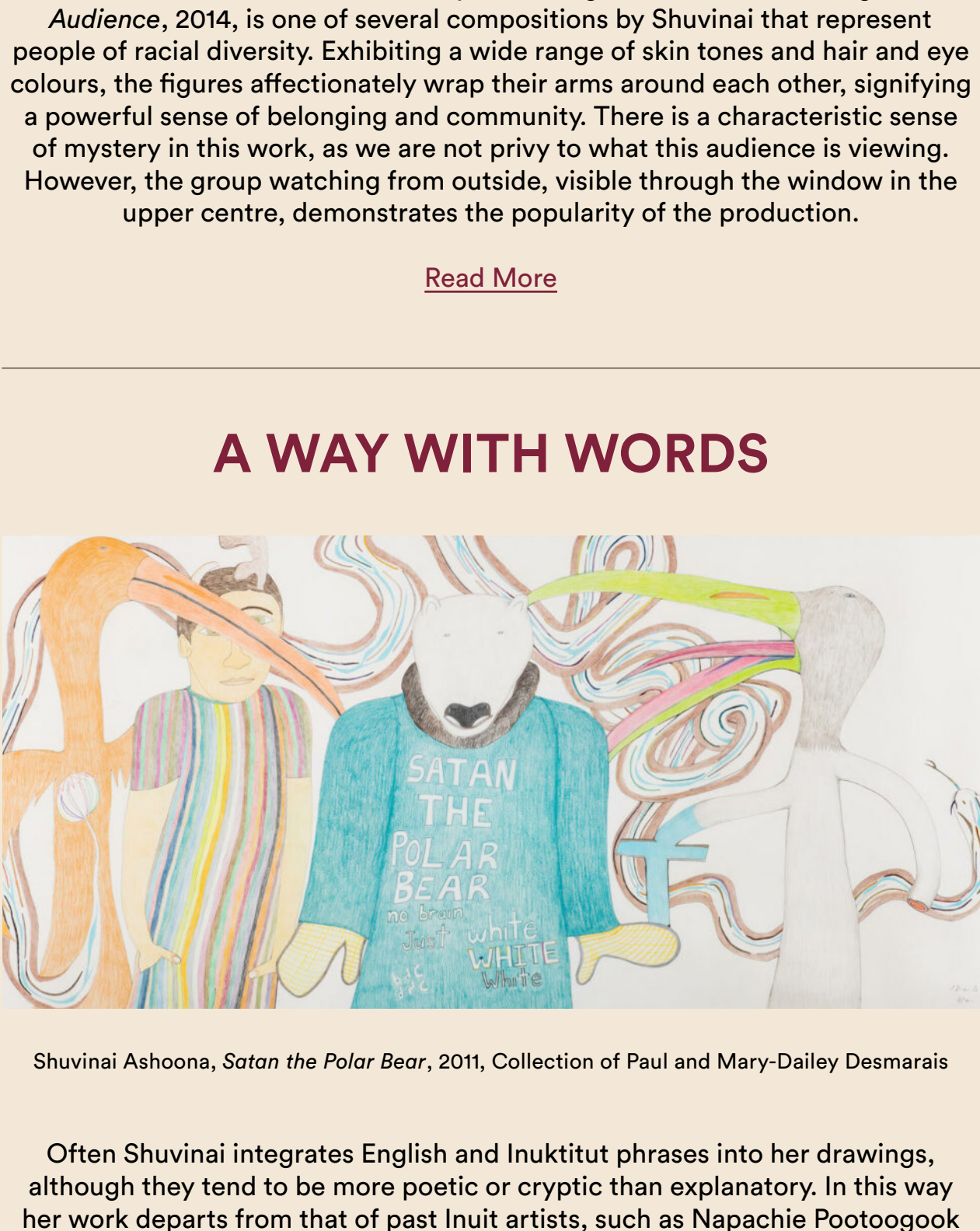


Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Earth Transformations*, 2012, Collection of Martha Burns and Paul Gross

This work, *Earth Transformations*, was part of the 2012 exhibition *Shuvinaï's Worlds* at Feeneley Fine Arts in Toronto. For the show, Shuvinaï produced a series of works that incorporated a variety of images of globes—floating, hand-held, and even a woman giving birth to an orb—in which the artist was not concerned with geographical accuracy but rather how her images of the world might suggest the possibility of multiple worlds and alternate realities. *Earth Transformations* presents a large globe in the work's upper left side. In it we see an aerial view of the community of Kinngait, complete with wildlife. This sphere is supported by two human legs, which are encircled by the tentacles of an octopus, while its arms are composed of strings of globes with clawed hands. On the right, an Inuk artist presents a large drawing to the creature, whose arms are raised in an expression of enthusiasm.

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MAKER OF MONSTROUS BEAUTY

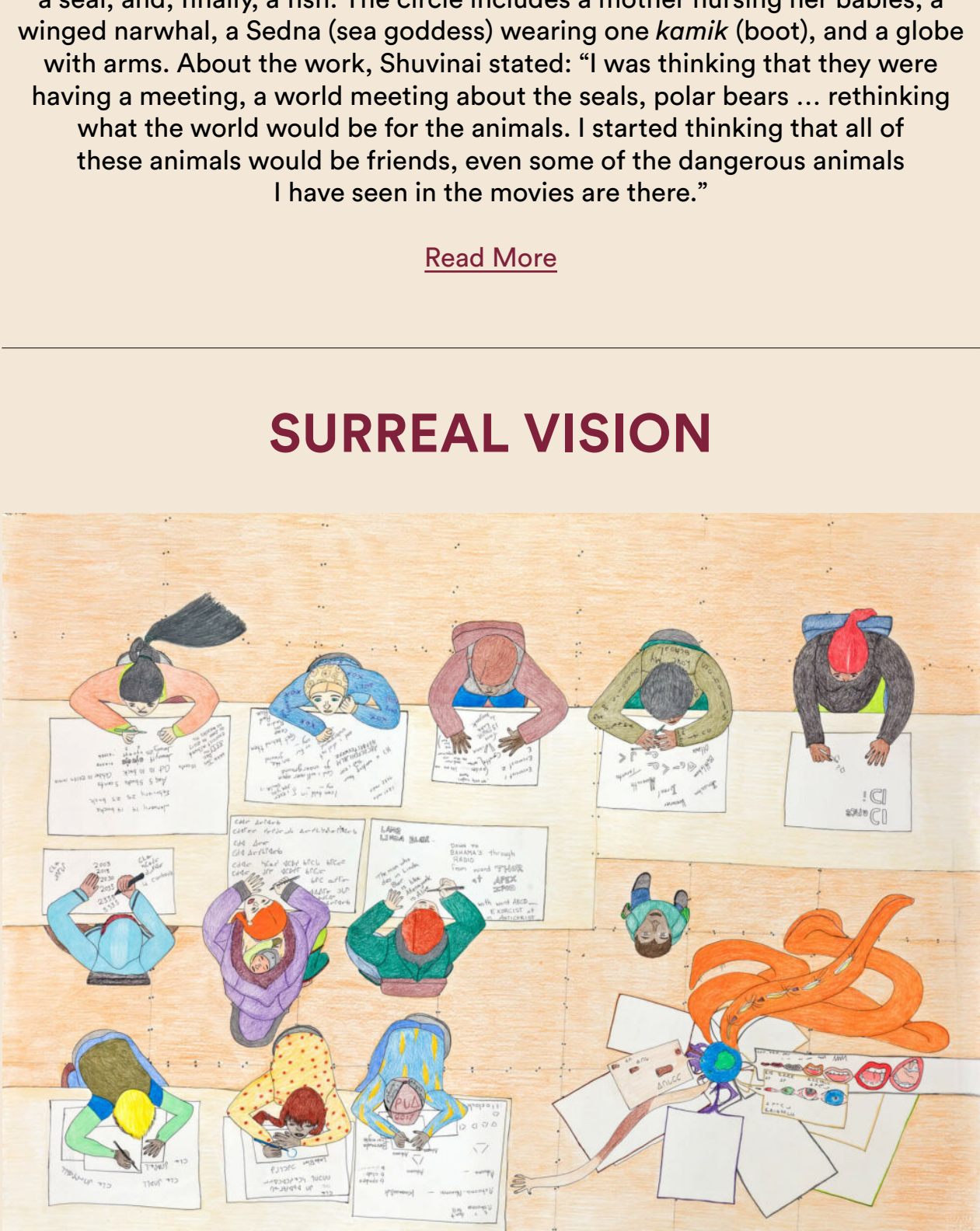


Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Creatures*, 2015, Collection of Suzanne Lamarre

Colourful monsters populate the landscapes of numerous works by Shuvinaï. The creatures are partly inspired by the artist's childhood recollections of encountering large sea creatures, such as whales, walrus, and narwhals, on the beach when she was a young girl. After watching films like *Jaws* (1975), Shuvinaï re-imagined her childhood memories in a thrilling new light. In *Creatures*, 2015, beautiful beasts of varying shapes, colours, and sizes crawl across the rocky landscape in this fantastical composition. Standing in the centre of the work is a tall, lime green figure with the face of a woman. Her nails are dangerously sharp and her legs morph into animal body parts. A three-eyed child peers curiously out of the back of the beast's *amauti* while a host of other hybrid creatures creep toward the central figure.

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VIRTUOSIC DRAUGHTSMANSHIP



Shuvinaï Ashoona, *All Kinds of Spiders in Different Views*, 2011, National Gallery of Canada

In *All Kinds of Spiders in Different Views*, 2011, we see Shuvinaï's mature style. This elaborate, large-scale drawing encompasses shifting views of spiders and other insects in a rugged landscape. Its complexity attests to the artist's unrivalled draughtsmanship and deft balance of black ink with the negative space of the white paper. The work is all the more remarkable considering Shuvinaï never received any formal artistic training. Following the apprenticeship system practiced in the North, the artist strengthened her drawing skills by working alongside others with more experience at the studio of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative.

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COMMUNITY AND DIVERSITY

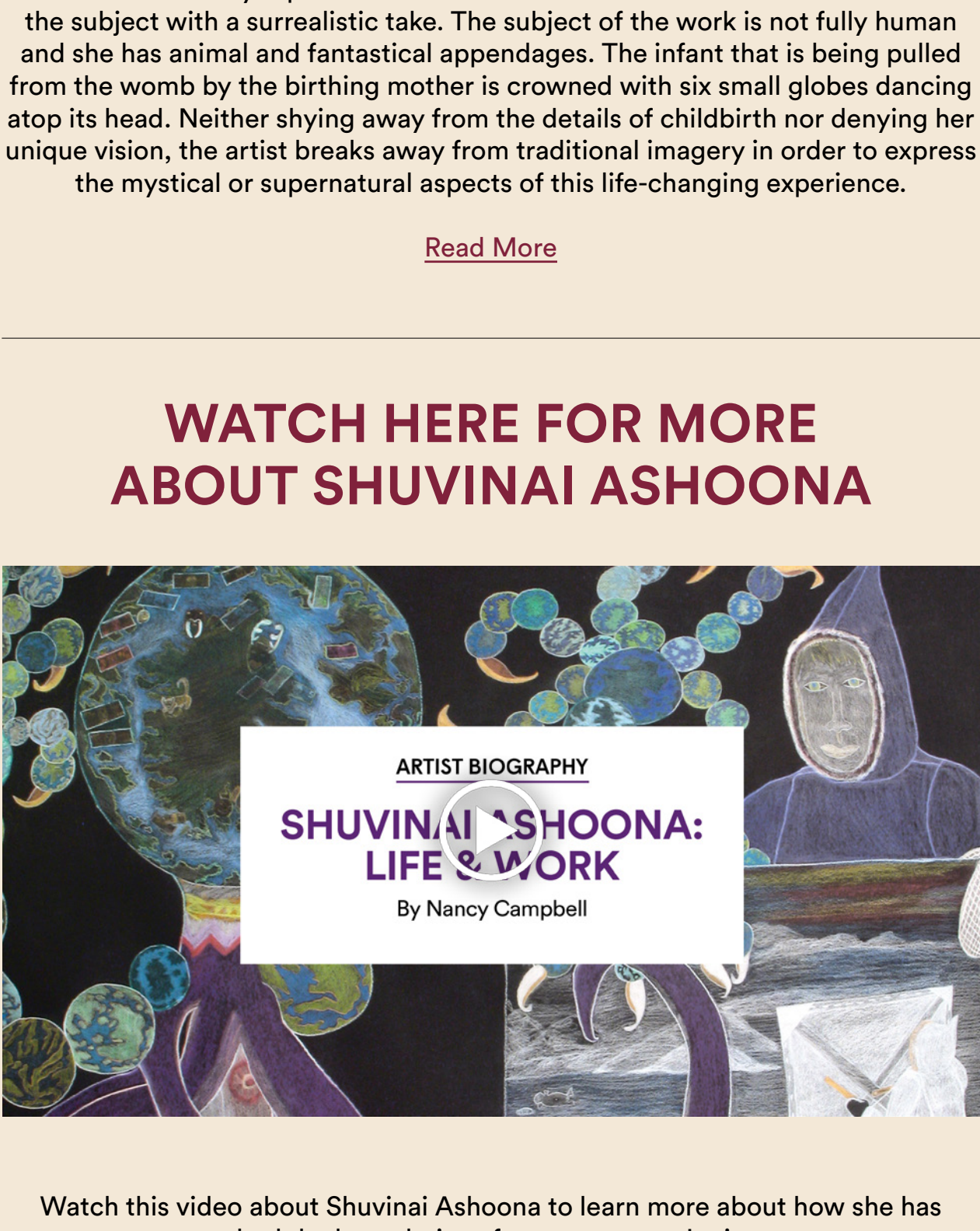


Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Audience*, 2014, Collection of Paul and Mary-Dailey Desmarais

A hallmark of Shuvinaï's art is that it presents figures of different backgrounds. *Audience*, 2014, is one of several compositions by Shuvinaï that represent people of racial diversity. Exhibiting a wide range of skin tones and hair and eye colours, the figures affectionately wrap their arms around each other, signifying a powerful sense of belonging and community. There is a characteristic sense of mystery in this work, as we are not privy to what this audience is viewing. However, the group watching from *Outside*, visible through the window in the upper centre, demonstrates the popularity of the production.

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A WAY WITH WORDS

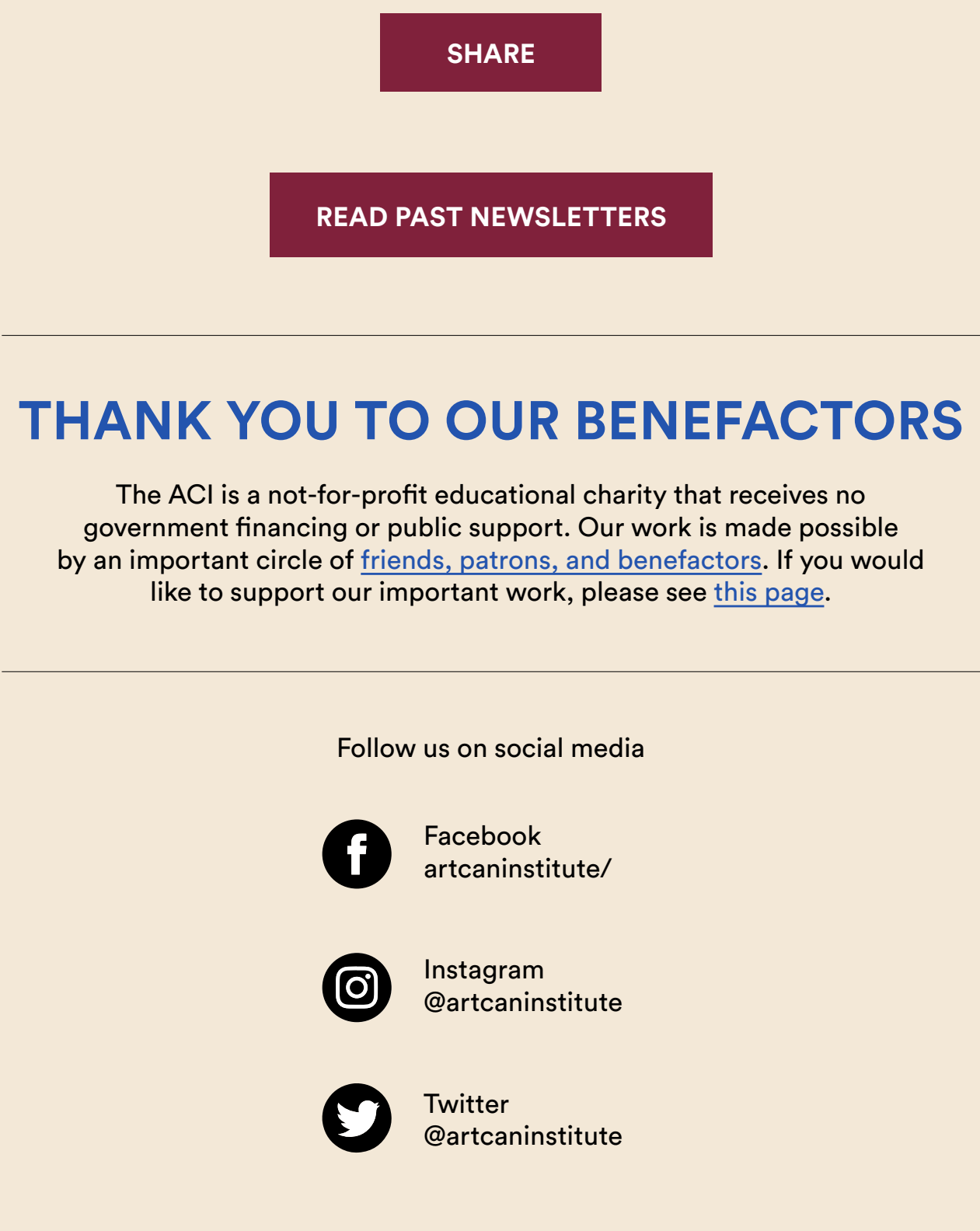


Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Satan the Polar Bear*, 2011, Collection of Paul and Mary-Dailey Desmarais

Often Shuvinaï integrates English and Inuktitut phrases into her drawings, although they tend to be more poetic or cryptic than explanatory. In this way her work departs from that of past Inuit artists, such as Napachie Pootoogook (1938–2002) or Pudlo Pudlat (1916–1992), who provided narrative descriptions in their drawings. In this enigmatic work, a polar bear is wearing a blue garment embellished with text that reads: "Satan the Polar Bear / no brain just white white white." And, the anthropomorphic bear, wearing mittens, is not menacing. Surrounding it are a human figure in a striped dress, two long-beaked birds, and an exceptionally long snake. As with many of Shuvinaï's drawings, the meaning is playful rather than pedantic.

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A WORLD FOR EVERYONE



Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Composition (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, 2007–8, Collection of Edward J. Guarino

In this boisterous circular composition, Shuvinaï presents the interconnectedness of life—the basis of Inuit traditional knowledge and values. A group of figures, hand in hand, form a ring around a brown bear, who is nursed by a polar bear, a seal, and, finally, a fish. The circle includes a mother nursing her babies, a winged narwhal, a Sedna (sea goddess) wearing one *kamik* (boot), and a globe with arms. About the work, Shuvinaï stated: "I was thinking that they were having a meeting, a world meeting about the seals, polar bears ... rethinking what the world would be for the animals. I started thinking that all of these animals would be friends, even some of the dangerous animals I have seen in the movies are there."

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SURREAL VISION

Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2017, Collection of Allison and Damir Matic

Since the 1990s, Shuvinaï's works have displayed a surreal sensibility, one that draws on her imaginings, Inuit stories, and popular culture. In *Untitled*, 2017, the artist imbues an ordinary classroom scene with an otherworldly dimension. The aerial view shows students seated across from each other writing words in both English and Inuktitut on large pieces of paper. Certain text repeatedly appears on different sheets, such as the title of the 1973 horror film *The Exorcist* and the name of its lead actress, Linda Blair. To confound this scene, orange tongues and an elongated arm are bursting forth from a miniature globe in the lower right corner.

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VISIONARY LANDSCAPE

Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Composition (Hunting Monsters)*, 2015, Oakville Galleries

Challenging conventional depictions of the snow-covered, sparsely populated Arctic, Shuvinaï presents a fresh take on depictions of Northern landscapes. In this work, *Composition (Hunting Monsters)*, 2015, the tundra teems with Inuit hunters, gigantic monsters, and black birds. A row of men wielding weaponry prepares to confront a white creature with a coiled body and its companion, who possesses a narwhal tusk but resembles a walrus. Near the centre, a terrifying black bird has taken flight—a foreboding sign of the fatal events that are about to unfold. Although this Arctic landscape is highly imaginative, it is also deeply rooted in Shuvinaï's personal experiences. When she was in her late teens, Shuvinaï and her family spent nearly a decade living on the land, instilling her with a deep understanding of and respect for it.

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CHALLENGING ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Happy Mother*, 2013, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Happy Mother, 2013, presents a blue-eyed, blond-haired woman in labour and a theme that is rarely represented in Inuit art: childbirth. Yet Shuvinaï addresses the subject with a surrealistic take. The subject of the work is not fully human and she has animal and fantastical appendages. The infant that is being pulled from the womb by the birthing mother is crowned with six small globes dancing atop its head. Neither shying away from the details of childbirth nor denying her unique vision, the artist breaks away from traditional imagery in order to express the mystical or supernatural aspects of this life-changing experience.

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WATCH HERE FOR MORE ABOUT SHUVINAI ASHOONA

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY
**SHUVINAI ASHOONA:
LIFE & WORK**
By Nancy Campbell

Watch this video about Shuvinaï Ashoona to learn more about how she has pushed the boundaries of contemporary Inuit art.

[Watch Here](#)

AVAILABLE NOW SHUVINAI ASHOONA: LIFE & WORK

by Nancy G. Campbell

For a more in-depth look, enjoy a print book copy of *Shuvinaï Ashoona: Life & Work* by Nancy G. Campbell.

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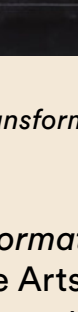
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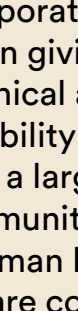
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