

APRIL 16, 2021

QAUMAJUQ'S BRIGHT NORTHERN LIGHT

FORGING THE FUTURE OF INUIT ART

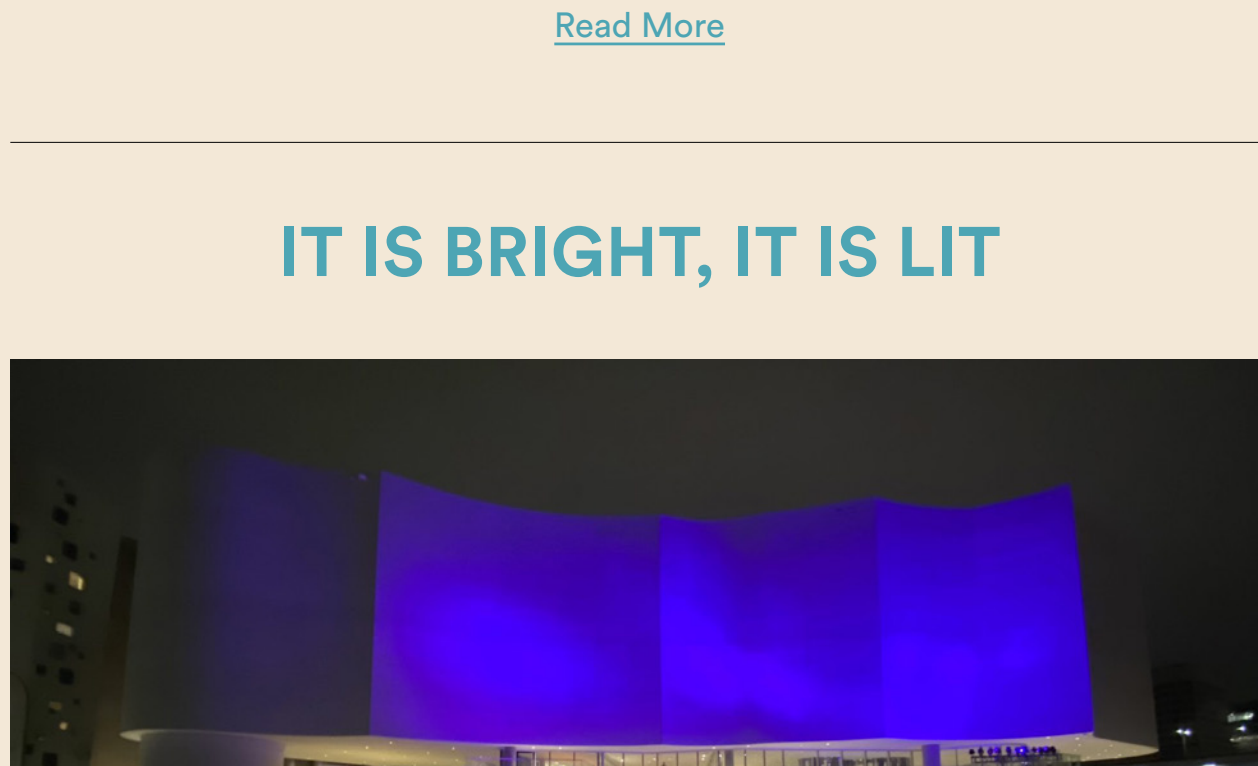
Dr. Stephen Borys, director and CEO of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, on the making of the world's largest museum of Inuit art



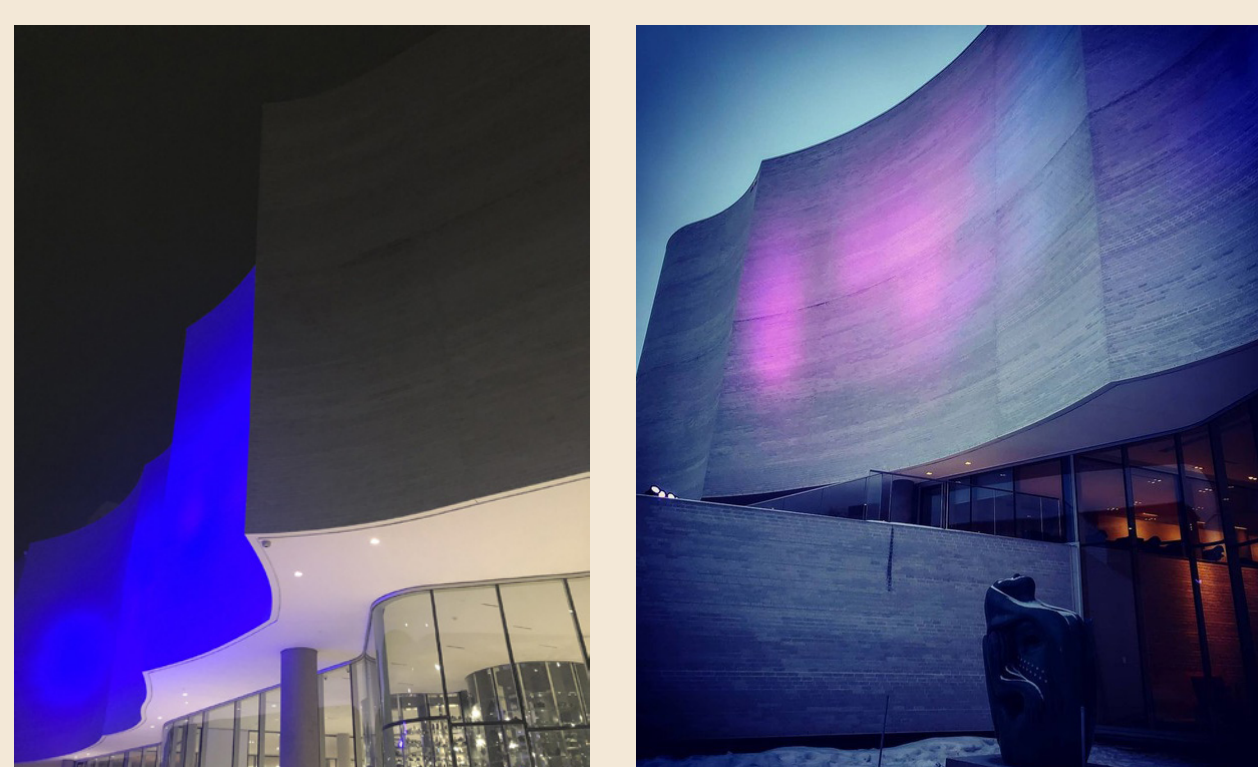
Last month, the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) opened [Qaumajuq](#) (see details on pronunciation below), the world's largest museum of Inuit art. A groundbreaking moment for Canada and Inuit visual culture, the 40,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art addition to the gallery houses an unrivalled collection of nearly 14,000 works of Inuit art. Although the concept for *Qaumajuq* at the WAG stretches back to the 1950s when the gallery first acquired Inuit art, an Inuit art centre became a priority for Dr. Stephen Borys when he assumed the role of director and CEO in 2008. I recently caught up with Borys to discuss *Qaumajuq* and the highlights of this extraordinary new addition to our country's cultural landscape, including its architectural design, Inuktitut name, and the landmark inaugural exhibition *INUA*.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

ARCTIC INSPIRATION



Qaumajuq, the Inuit art centre at the Winnipeg Art Gallery

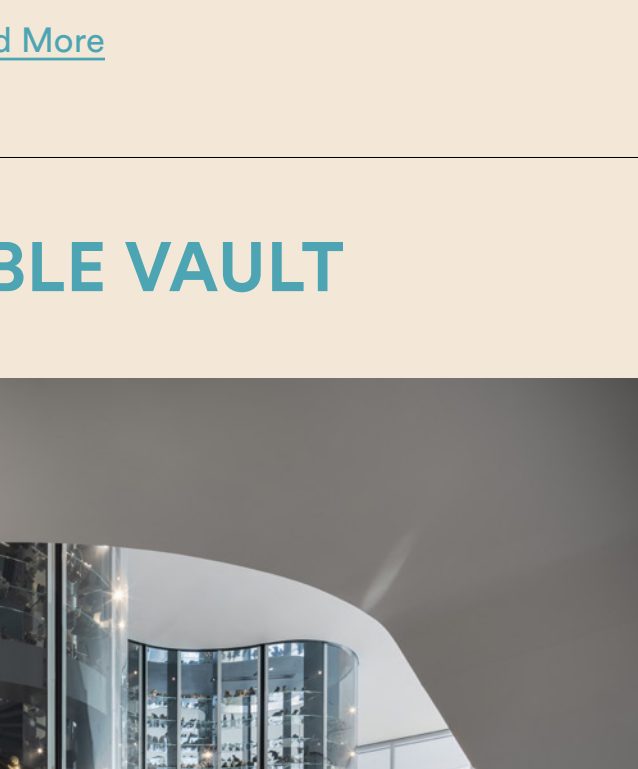
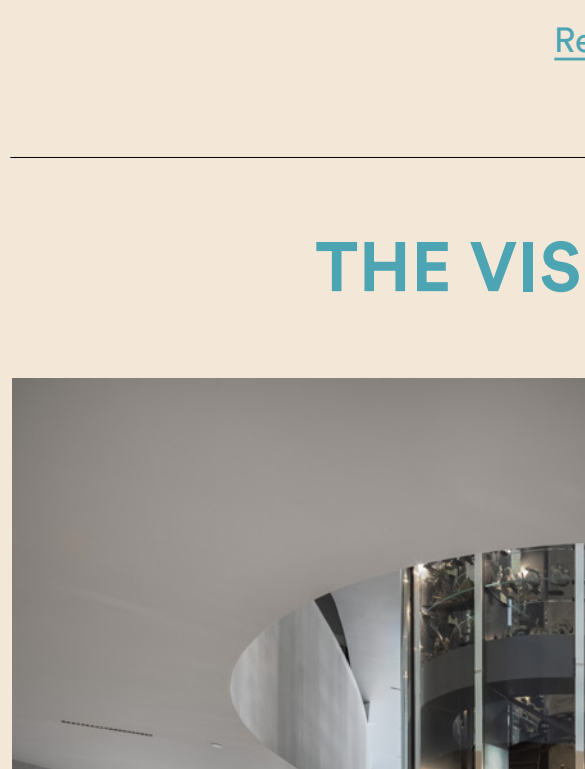
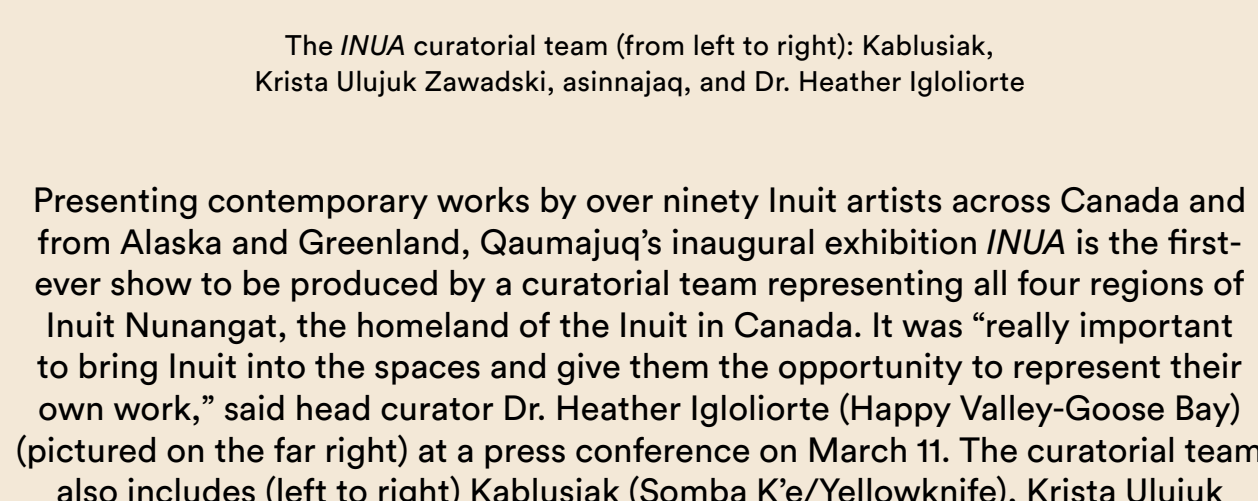


Stephen Borys, director and CEO of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, stands in *Qaumajuq*'s inaugural exhibition *INUA*

Designed by the Los-Angeles-based Michael Maltzan and built over the course of nearly three years, *Qaumajuq* features an undulating white stone façade that mimics the shape of an iceberg. Its smooth, expansive surfaces evoke the vastness of the Arctic landscape as well as the Inuit carvings housed within the building. After Maltzan's firm was selected through an international competition—which drew 125 architectural submissions and sixty-five formal submissions from thirteen countries—he travelled with Borys to Europe to study the architecture of major museums. Then, they visited Nunavut. “It was a game-changing, career-changing trip,” says Borys. “Michael [went] back to the drawing board and he start[ed] over.” Concentrating on the essence of light, colour, texture, and form, Maltzan developed a design that embodies the uniqueness of the North and boldly departs from the standard white cube aesthetic.

[Read More](#)

IT IS BRIGHT, IT IS LIT

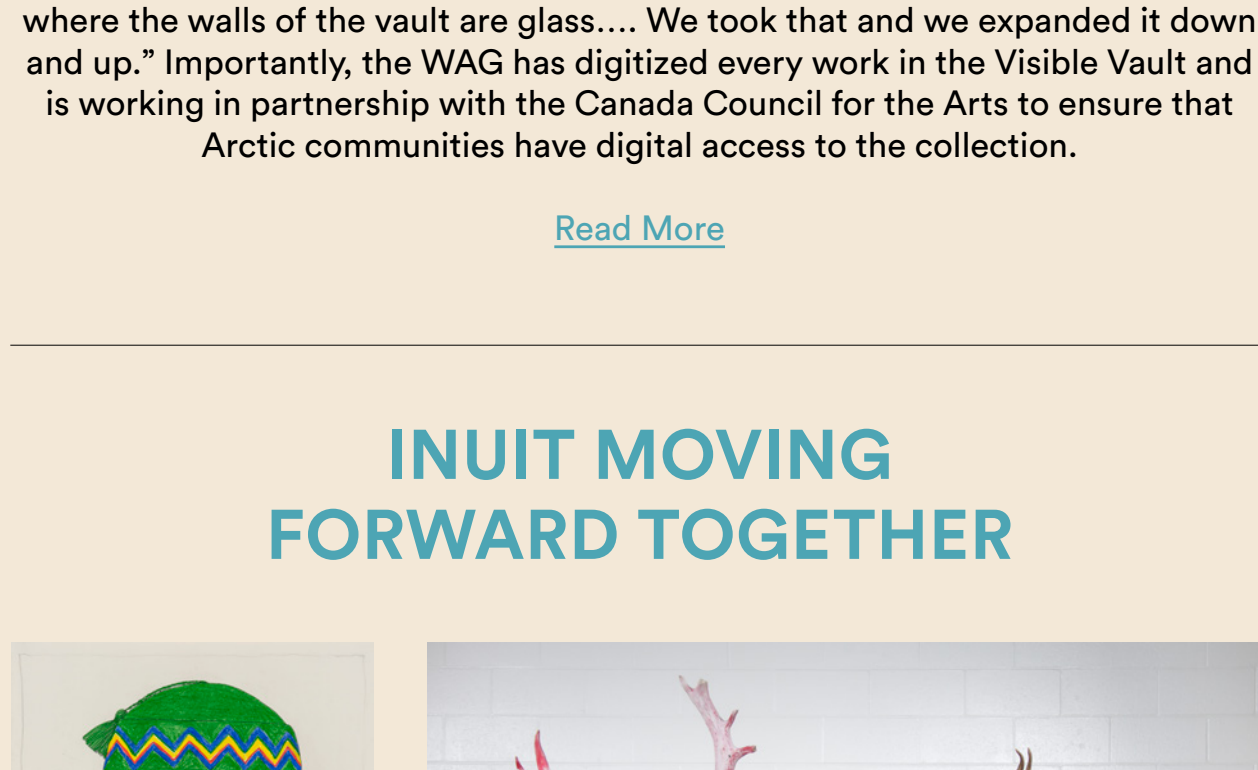


WAG-Qaumajuq northern lights projections

Qaumajuq (pronounced “kow-ma-yourk” or sometimes “how-ma-yourk”) means “It is bright, it is lit” in Inuktitut. The name references the museum's spaces filled with sunlight – thanks to transparent glass walls at its entrance and twenty-two skylights in its main gallery space, *Qiaik* (Inuktitut for “sky”). The building and the spaces within were named by a circle of Indigenous language keepers—a shift in authority from traditional museum leadership, explains Borys, who as a settler was a guest within the process. “Whatever [names] they came with, we had to accept.” It was an eye-opening, poignant, and successful approach to the Indigenous of the WAG. “[The name *Qaumajuq* is] so powerful and it's caught on quickly. [As] part of our virtual launch, we chatted with people across the country asking them to pronounce it.... It's a good reconciliation exercise to learn a new Indigenous name.”

[Read More](#)

AN INUIT-LED EXHIBITION

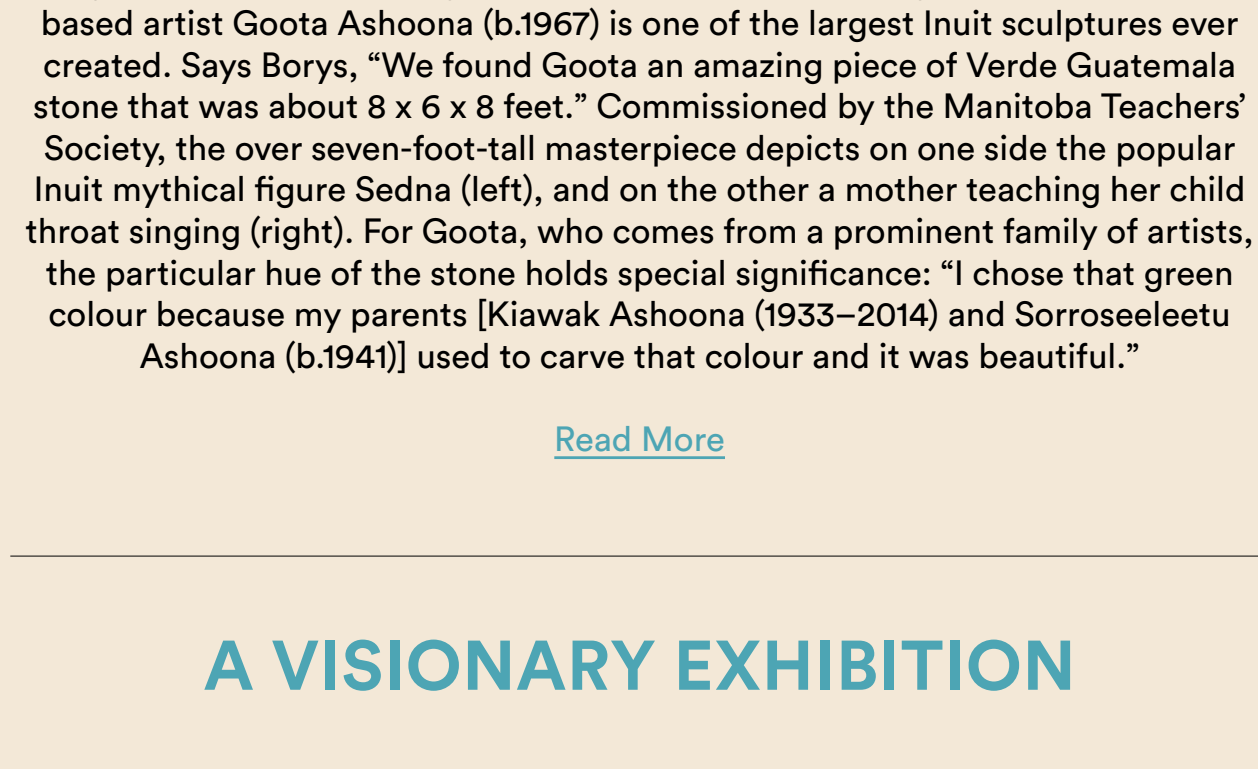


The *INUA* curatorial team (from left to right): Kablusiak, Krista Ulujuk Zawadzki, asinnajaq, and Dr. Heather Iglooliorte

Presenting contemporary works by over ninety Inuit artists across Canada and from Alaska and Greenland, *Qaumajuq*'s inaugural exhibition *INUA* is the first-ever show to be produced by a curatorial team representing all four regions of Inuit Nunangat, the homeland of the Inuit in Canada. It was “really important to bring Inuit into the spaces and give them the opportunity to represent their own work,” said head curator Dr. Heather Iglooliorte (Happy Valley-Goose Bay) (pictured on the far right) at a press conference on March 11. The curatorial team also includes (left to right) Kablusiak (Somba K'e/Yellowknife), Krista Ulujuk Zawadzki (Igloodjagruk/Rankin Inlet), and asinnajaq (Inukjuak). Says Borys, “*INUA* is truly an Inuit-led show.... We were able to do this by standing aside, supporting the [all-Inuit team], and listening.”

[Read More](#)

THE VISIBLE VAULT

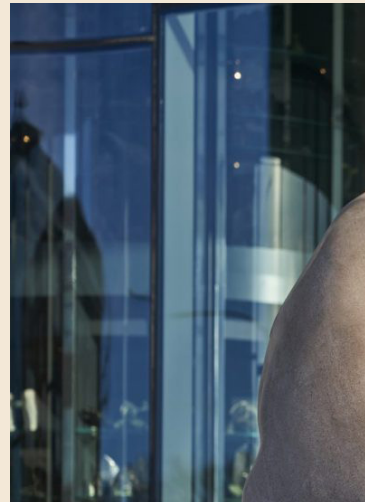


Qaumajuq's Visible Vault

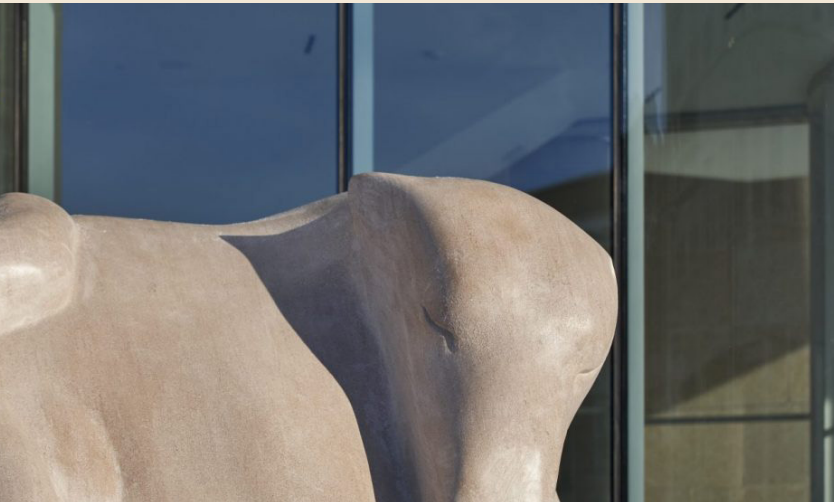
One of the most innovative features of *Qaumajuq* is its Visible Vault, a three-storey, 500-shelf glass vault in the museum's entrance hall displaying nearly 5,000 stone carvings that represent all of the Northern art-making communities. Far from being a static display, Borys says, “[*Qaumajuq*’s] visible vault is truly a functional vault on the inside. You can see a curator or a conservator working.” The concept of the Visible Vault was inspired by Borys and Maltzan's visit to the Natural History Museum in Berlin. He explains, “They have a huge specimen collection, and it's in this big glass square vault, where the walls of the vault are glass.... We took that and we expanded it down and up.” Importantly, the WAG has digitized every work in the Visible Vault and is working in partnership with the Canada Council for the Arts to ensure that Arctic communities have digital access to the collection.

[Read More](#)

INUIT MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER



Ningikulu Teevee, *Asivagti Palliniq* (Weathered Hunter), 2016



Mattiusi Iyaituk and Étienne Guay, *Iqalualimiliuq* (First Mermaid) that Can Maneuver on Land, 2016

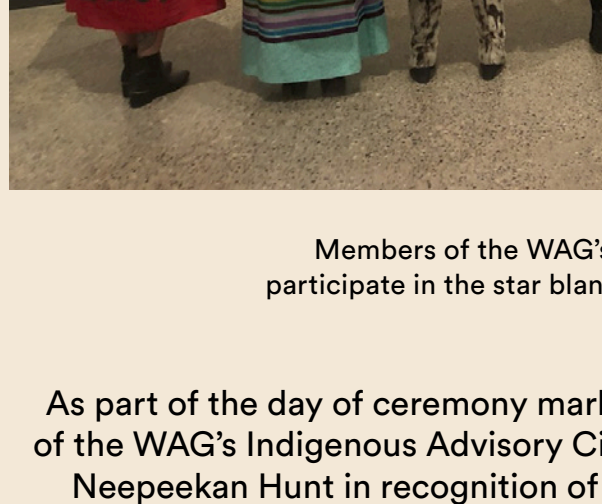
This intimate portrait of a weathered hunter by Kinngait-based Ningikulu Teevee (b.1963) (left) and fantastical Quebec-mermaid hybrid sculpture by Ivujivik artist Mattiusi Iyaituk (b.1950) and Sledcar sculptor Étienne Guay (right) are featured in the exhibition *INUA*, which brings together works in a wide range of media that disrupt preconceptions of Inuit art, including photography, painting, mixed-media sculpture, and digital media and installation art. *INUA* means “life force” or “spirit force,” and is also the acronym for Inuit Nunangat Ungammuktut Atautikuk or “Inuit Moving Forward Together.” Showcasing the evolution and breadth of Inuit art over the past eighty years, this historic exhibition reveals the rich past, present, and future of Inuit art.

[Read More](#)

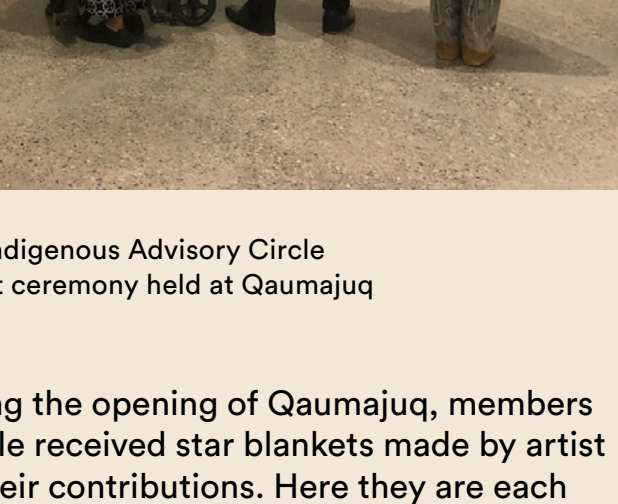
Share this newsletter with friends who love Canada's art, or invite them to [sign up here](#) for our weekly dispatch.

TUNIIGUSIIA/THE GIFT

by Goota Ashoona



Goota Ashoona, *Tunigusiia/The Gift* (detail of Sedna), 2020



Goota Ashoona, *Tunigusiia/The Gift* (detail of mother and child), 2020

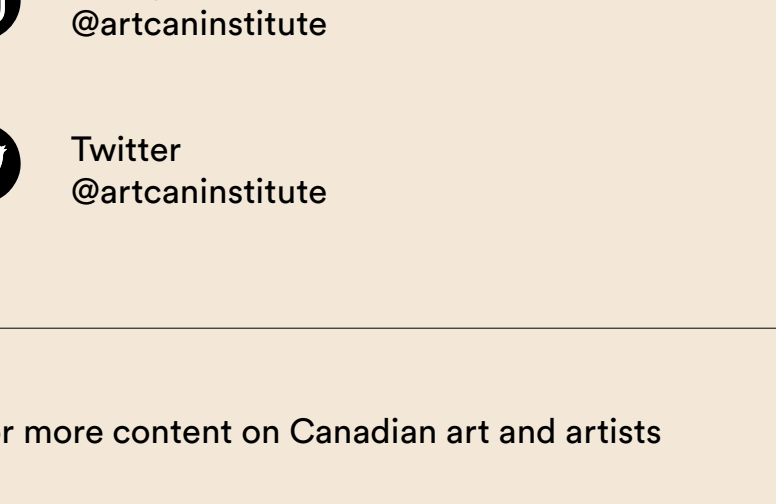
Located in *Qaumajuq*'s outdoor plaza, Nutaq Tummaqtuyyuk (Inuvialuktun for “big steps forward”), *Tunigusiia/The Gift*, 2020, by Kinngait-born, Manitoba-based artist Goota Ashoona (b.1967) is one of the largest Inuit sculptures ever created. Says Borys, “We found Goota an amazing piece of Verde Guatemala stone that was about 8 x 6 x 8 feet.” Commissioned by the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the over seven-foot-tall masterpiece depicts on one side the popular Inuit mythical figure Sedna (left), and on the other a mother teaching her North Inuit sibling (right). For Goota, who comes from a prominent family of artists, the particular hue of the stone holds special significance: “I chose that green colour because my parents [Kiwak Ashoona (1933–2014) and Corroseeleut Ashoona (b.1941)] used to carve that colour and it was beautiful.”

[Read More](#)

A VISIONARY EXHIBITION



Drew Michael, *Looking into My Beat*, 2020



Glenn Gear, *Iluani/Silami* (It's Full of Stars), 2021

Praised by *Canadian Art* as “the most openly queer and inclusive Inuit art exhibition to date,” *Qaumajuq*'s inaugural exhibition *INUA* highlights works by Inuit 2SLGBTQ+ artists, including this striking mask (left) by Alaskan artist Drew Michael (Yup'ik/Inupiaq) (b.1984). According to Michael, his mask represents “looking out into the world through the spectacles [sic] of our culture.” *INUA* also features the commissioned installation *Iluani/Silami* (It's Full of Stars), 2021 (right), by Newfoundland-born, Montreal-based Glenn Gear (b.1970), consisting of a shipping container—a familiar object in the North—whose interior comprises black and white murals of human-animal hybrids flanking a circular video projection. Says Borys, the exhibition reveals “how many of the artists feel about certain things that we never really talked about.... There's a levelling of race, of gender, of issues of spirituality, of issues of sovereignty, issues of reconciliation. You know, there's some tough, tough images.... But ultimately, you come away feeling uplifted.”

[Read More](#)

TIME TO PLAY

by Abraham Angvik Ruben

Abraham Angvik Ruben, *Time to Play*, 2020

This light-hearted sculpture of a large polar bear playing with her cubs by internationally acclaimed, Paulatuk, NWT-born artist Abraham Angvik Ruben (b.1951) is installed alongside Goota Ashoona's *Tunigusiia/The Gift*, 2020, in *Qaumajuq*'s outdoor plaza, Nutaq Tummaqtuyyuk. *Time to Play*, 2020, was commissioned by the Winnipeg-based philanthropist and admirer of polar bears Tannis M. Richardson. She especially wanted children to enjoy the piece says Borys, adding that the work is a vital counterpoint to the WAG's fortress-like appearance. *Time to Play*, he says, is one “of the most accessible Inuit pieces I've ever known.”

[Read More](#)

THE BLESSING OF QAUMAJUQ IN CEREMONY

Members of the WAG's Indigenous Advisory Circle participate in the star blanket ceremony held at *Qaumajuq*

As part of the day of ceremony marking the opening of *Qaumajuq*, members of the WAG's Indigenous Advisory Circle received star blankets made by artist Neepeekan Hunt in recognition of their contributions. Here they are each wrapped in a blanket as they stand in front of Pangnirtung artist Elisapee Ishulutaq's (1925–2018) mural *Yesterday and Today*, 2014, installed in the exhibition *INUA*. The Indigenous Advisory Circle—consisting of Inuit, First Nations, and Métis leaders and cultural advocates and originally numbering twenty members—played a crucial role in planning all aspects of the museum, says Borys. At the ceremony, which included Elders and Ceremonial Leaders from the seven Indigenous nations of Manitoba, Grandmother Pahan Pte San Win explained the symbolism of the blankets: “In our community, when someone does a good deed, we make a beautiful star blanket like this, and we put it around them. And we do that because it's our way of saying this is our arms around you. You are being honoured and your being acknowledged.”

[Read More](#)

Our entire collection of newsletters can be found on the ACI website, for you to read, share, and enjoy.

PAST NEWSLETTERS

THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

The ACI is a not-for-profit educational charity that receives no government financing or public support. Our work is made possible by an important circle of [friends, patrons, and benefactors](#).

If you would like to support our important work, please see [this page](#).

Follow us on social media

Facebook
[artcanadainstitute/](#)

Instagram
[@artcanadainstitute](#)

Twitter
[@artcanadainstitute](#)

