

Community Research Report
Nunavut Research Institute Licence # 01027 13N-M
Kaitlyn Rathwell, BA, MSc. PhD Can.

The role of art and artistic processes for bridging knowledge systems and learning about complex environmental change

Introduction

Art and artistic processes help bridge knowledge systems, and, by doing so, contribute to understanding change and translating that understanding of change into action. The communities of Cape Dorset and Pangnirtung, NU, are the focus of this study because both communities maintain art making as an important cultural/economic focus. People in these communities have been adapting to many changes in the environment. Our objectives are to learn about and leverage arts and art making to:

- 1) To examine the role of art in understanding and making sense of Arctic environmental and sea ice change;
- 2) To engage with local artists and youth to create an artistic piece on the theme of Arctic change
- 3) To assess how art and artistic process may service as a method, strategy or approach to bridge knowledge systems (e.g. youth-elder; scientific- Inuit).



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Our research explores the role of art and artistic processes as an increasingly important context in which to bring together knowledge systems in respectful ways. Efforts to bridge different types and sources of knowledge (e.g., local, traditional, scientific, policy) are needed to transform our understandings of social-ecological change (e.g. Arctic sea ice change), and to generate the insights and support structures needed to help communities adapt.

Study Sites Methods

I lived in Pangnirtung and Cape Dorset, NU between June and November 2013. The research involved a diversity of methods including semi-structured interviews with n=30 professional artists; participant observation during participation and co- facilitation of a collaborative mural project - involving Inuit youth, elders and artists; and, follow up interviews with mural participants.

Selected Results

Art about climate and sea ice change tells rich stories

Artists are creating artworks about Arctic environmental and sea ice change. These artworks demonstrate intimate knowledge about environmental and sea ice change as well as affect and values surrounding these changes. When asking Inuit about their perspectives on Arctic environmental change, artists have much knowledge. For example, changes in types and rhythms of sea ice, wind patters and weather are often noted. When artists make artworks reflecting on this knowledge they speak in many dimensions. For example Elisapee Ishulutaq describes her artwork titled 'Climate Change'.



Figure 1. 'Climate Change' by Elisapee Ishulutaq. Shown with permission.

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“The igloo is melting and the tree we see, we don’t see here in the Arctic and I was told you won’t see it here, but we see more and more new and larger plants... [The drawing is] about the way the climate is changing its warming up... The person there is glad to see the tree. The person is happy to see the tree growing where it is not even supposed to grow... I like anything that grows on the land, anything that renews itself, like springtime... The igloo is long gone history and [the Inuk] is happy that things are growing; it is a transition theme” (Elisapee Ishulutaq, pers. comm. August 2013).

In this example, Ishulutaq expresses knowledge about changing Arctic landscape (new plants, melting igloo as metaphor for warmer weather) and she also describes practice and belief during these changes: emphasizing a positive outlook on life, the importance of celebrating renewal and transformation, and being adaptive.

Art and art making helps to bridge different type of knowledge

Our study reveals that art making is one way to connect knowledge systems by fulfilling the following functions:

1. Embedding knowledge and traditional ways into carvings and graphic arts.
2. Using artworks as a way to connect with different people and share knowledge with them (e.g. grandchildren, youth)
3. Art and art making create continuity between generations in communities. This happens because many have parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles or cousins who carve or draw and act as inspiration. Sometimes artists use important symbols like the ulu to indicate the importance of tradition in artworks that also describe transition and change.
4. Art – making together, for example during our collaborative mural project, provided opportunities to learn new skills and stories about the phenomena we were drawing or sewing. For example we learned stories about changing glaciers in the Pangnirtung Fjord as we incorporated a picture of them onto the art mural.
5. Art can be moved around and in that way acts as an object to start conversations and learning opportunities. For example, we brought the mural to elder’s homes to frame it on a stretch. This was a neat way to connect something traditional with something modern (youth mural). Also when carvings and graphic arts are exhibited in the south, people learn about environmental changes occurring in the arctic and how Inuit are adapting to these changes.

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Our results indicate that art making has a multi-functional capacity to bridge diverse knowledge systems, to promote local perspectives of environmental change, and to nurture traditional knowledge across generations. Opportunities to invest in the arts in these communities are also opportunities for understanding complex environmental change in the Arctic and creating visual aids for action.

For photos, stories and music please visit: klaluna/tumblr.ca

For more information, or to be involved in future projects please contact me:
kaitlyn.rathwell@uwaterloo.ca

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