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Sarah Anne Johnson's Arctic Wonderland

By Andrea Kunard, Associate Curator, Photographs, NGC on December 15, 2012

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Sarah Anne Johnson, *Black Box* (2010), chromogenic print, photo retouching dyes, acrylic ink, gouache and india ink, incised lines, 76.1 x 111.7 cm; image: 70.9 x 106.6 cm. NGC

The Arctic has been a constant presence in Canadian art. In addition to the multitude of prints, drawings and sculptures produced by Inuit artists with Inuit themes, many more works have been created by explorers, artists, and photographers over the years, reflecting their own times and cultures.

During the early nineteenth century, for example, George Back presented the Arctic as a place of terror and unearthly beauty. Photographs taken during the A.P. Low Expedition, at the turn of the twentieth century, implied sovereignty over what was then viewed as *terra nullius*: an empty region ripe for non-Aboriginal exploitation and occupation. A few decades later, artists Frederick Varley, Lawren Harris, and A.Y. Jackson from Canada's famous Group of Seven also journeyed north, this time in search of raw Nature.

In the 1940s, Inuit artist Peter Pitseolak provided a counter-narrative to non-Aboriginal views of the North by documenting the culture and concerns of his own family and people. More recently, Winnipeg artist Richard Holden has produced austere images of northern landscapes, and Newfoundland artist Marlene Creates has used photography to document her sensitive intercessions with Nature.

The recent series by Winnipeg-based artist Sarah Anne Johnson, *Arctic Wonderland*, reflects our ongoing fascination with the North. In works reminiscent of historical photographs, she captures the region's vastness and majesty: stolid icebergs float beneath tumultuous skies in empty grey seas, and barren mountains rear up out of icy waters.

Unlike earlier artists, Johnson interacts with the image. Using techniques such as embossing, painting and

incising, she introduces a range of cultural concerns. For example, the exploding black box in *Black Box* is reminiscent of the mysterious, evolution-accelerating entity that materializes in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The resigned march of figures towards this cheerless and maleficent object suggests a crisis of imagination and spirit. By the same token, the distant cloud in *Dark Cloud* evokes malevolence and impending ecological disaster.

In addition to works expressing current anxieties about the Arctic and the threat of global warming, Johnson produces pieces of a more whimsical and celebratory nature. The festive *Explosions* features colourful fireworks, and *Cheerleading Pyramid* is both vibrant and optimistic. Johnson views these images as a statement of actions and consequences. Although the fireworks and confetti in *Explosions* suggest celebration, they also imply the ways in which humanity tends to “barrel ahead without thinking about future consequences.” Cheerleaders, on the other hand, are more similar to artists in Johnson’s mind—particularly artists who address important causes. Johnson herself believes that the future of the Arctic is the biggest problem the world currently faces—a situation that compels her to make art that speaks to political and environmental issues.

In addition to such concerns, Johnson’s works display today’s conflicting views of the Arctic. For some, the Arctic is idyllic and sublime; for others, it is the final frontier of corporate colonization—an environment ripe for increased tourism—as well as a barometer of our planet’s failing health.

Ultimately, Johnson’s *Arctic Wonderland* is both a real and imagined place. As a modern artistic exploration, her project adds to the exchange of ideas on a region that has fascinated humanity for hundreds of years.



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This looks like a really cool show (series?) - when and where can I see it?

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This series can be viewed in the exhibition, Builders: Canadian Biennial 2012, on view at the NGC until 18 February.

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Cette série peut être vue dans l'exposition, Les bâtisseurs. La biennale canadienne 2012, actuellement à l'affiche au MBAC jusqu'au 18 février.

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