

# Extraordinary sculptor exalts the everyday

## EXHIBIT | Cape Dorset artist's powerful work rises beyond Inuit categorization

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The work of Oviloo Tunnillie moves light years past ethnic stereotype. It is wholly Inuit and at the same time far beyond, just as it surpasses carving to become pure sculpture. When you look at this work you don't think Inuit sculpture.

The room takes your breath away. The 24 sculptures in the Marion Scott Gallery hum with the totality of perfection, objects that are exquisitely satisfying from every angle. This is the first exhibition in a decade at the gallery that was instrumental in bringing Oviloo to national and world attention and encouraged her to keep going in the

same unconventional direction. With one or two exceptions, all the works in it were created within the last year.

The sculptures contain the paradox of being several things at once: indigenous yet international, massive yet delicately precise, intimate yet cool in their self-containment. They create abstractions from the familiar. They elevate the everyday.

Gleaming serpentine stone contrasts with the matte surface of the waterfalls of hair that flow back from the women's heads, often to enclose the composition. The ovoid faces recall Modigliani. You could draw many more parallels but they'd be beside the point, that being this woman is a genius.

Even her name, Oviloo (pronounced

"oo-vee-loo"), sounds sculptural. This is probably how she should be addressed (traditionally the Inuit used to go by only one name). For that matter, we don't say Da Vinci when we're talking about Leonardo.

One of the most intensely moving images is a tall one of two *Throatsingers*. They stand face to face with their mouths open, close together, their hands on the other's shoulders. Only the cascading hair betrays the fact that the figures communing in vocal overtones are women. But they could represent anything. This loving piece is about the rapture of communication, of any form of communion. In the broadest sense it's about the miracle of sympathy and harmony.

The gallery walls have been stripped of all other Inuit works as if to reinforce the idea that Oviloo, who is one of very few women sculptors from Cape Dorset, is a pure artist beyond any ethnic modifiers. Only the atmospheric paintings of Edward Epp, themselves exquisite, are there, and supply a highly complementary background to this extraordinary woman.

The exhibition is all about women, their strength and sentience, particularly as applied to the women of the Inuit.

There is a documentary aspect to these works by a woman who was the victim of childhood tuberculosis, who spent years isolated in white sanatoria, losing part of her kinship identity in the process, and who recently survived ovarian cancer.

But documentary only to a point. Rather than dwell on these things direct-



Sedna is a sculpture from the exhibit Oviloo Tunnillie: *Meditations on Womanhood*, which runs from Saturday to Nov. 30 at the Marion Scott Gallery.

ly and narratively, Oviloo makes them the vaguely generalized ground for a kind of feminism based on broadly humanistic concerns. Inuit women aren't sculptors; this is the preserve of males, at least in Cape Dorset. A weight of gender expectation seems to account for the fatigue that bows the figure's head in *Woman Carving*, her large powerful hands drooping on her knees.

Some of the work is subtly subversive, like *Woman with a Stone Block*, where a female sculptor carries a massive block of stone, the front of which bears the image of an inukshuk. Was this produced at the request of a cynical entrepreneur or a northern government official trading on a saleable kitsch commodity?

All of the pieces in the exhibition are powerful, but one is especially so. It

depicts Sedna, a being out of Inuit mythology, part woman, part whale. Legend tells of a female cast out to sea by a man — her father, according to one regional variant.

He pushes her out of the kayak. When she tries to clamber back in, he cuts off her fingers and she drifts to the bottom. As her hands become flippers, her fingers become ocean creatures. Depending on the behaviour of mankind, it will prosper on fish and seal or go hungry.

The legend can be interpreted as abandonment. The point is that Sedna survives, despite everything. The face that Oviloo portrays in the sculpture is mysteriously hidden and private: neither what you'd expect of an ethnographic depiction nor of a feminist screed.

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