



Cite this article: Subhankar Banerjee, “Art as Long Environmentalism,” *Bully Pulpit*, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1714>.

Art as Long Environmentalism

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In 2010, the Art Gallery of Ontario presented an expansive exhibition, *Inuit Modern*, cocurated by Gerald McMaster and Ingo Hessel. In the last paragraph of a five-part essay in the exhibition catalogue, Hessel asks the following three questions:

- Who would have guessed that a souvenir art-cum-occupational therapy art-cum-welfare project would bring about a vibrant renaissance in Inuit culture?
- Who would have predicted that the art from a tiny ethnic minority could become a national treasure?
- Who would have thought that women, children, and the elderly would become valued and successful participants in a six-decade art experiment and that women and artists from the farthest-flung geographical margins could be in the vanguard of the newest achievements?

Instead of unpacking Hessel’s questions, I take a few of his words—“six-decade art experiment”—as a starting point to consider Inuit art as an exemplary case of *long environmentalism*, which at its most basic means an environmental engagement that has lasted, not days or months, but decades, and in so doing, becomes intergenerational.¹

So far, the scholarship on Inuit art has largely focused on establishing the works as art (not craft) and authentic (not a derivative of the art produced by the dominant culture)—as well as on its social and political significance.

It would also be productive to engage with Inuit art through an ecocritical lens, bringing the expansive corpus into conversation with emerging scholarship in multispecies studies as well as recent environmental justice publications, including the work *The Right to Be Cold* by Inuit activist [Sheila Watt-Cloutier](#).

I will not be able to accomplish that in this short text, but can only signal the need and offer a starting point by considering a theme and bringing an early work related to it into conversation with one produced more recently.

The theme we might consider here is Inuit ecospirituality and multispecies cosmology.

Untitled (Composition with Taleelayu) is a 1962 copperplate engraving on paper attributed to Johnnie Ashevak and/or [Kenojuak Ashevak](#), husband and wife, of Kinngait (Cape Dorset), Nunavut. The image is made up of six figures: Inuit sea goddess Taleelayu (or Sedna), an Inuk (singular for Inuit), two sea creatures, and two birds. The goddess, the human, and the nonhuman creatures of the sea and sky are in a circle with hands/feet/wings/tails/fins touching, as if engaged in a dance in the act of multispecies world-making. A jubilant scene, created with spare lines and dots.

Contrast that early work with a contemporary ink drawing, Untitled (Sedna by the Sea), by [Ningeokuluk Teevee](#), also of Kinngait, bearing an Inuit inscription that translates as “An Inuk’s mind and body are being destroyed.” Teevee has blended the sea goddess and the Inuk into one body with a largely human form except the tail fin, conjuring a haggard Sedna, sitting on a mound at the edge of the sea amid liquor bottles, and smoking. Toward the top of the image, on another stretch of land strewn with garbage, a tractor is digging while a truck dumps liquid waste that streams down into the sea. It is a dystopic scene, whose monochromatic palette seems apt.

The two works are separated by about forty years, and during that brief period, a jubilant, multispecies world-making has become a dystopic world unraveling, according to the artists. Inuit artists such as Ashevak and Teevee have created works that celebrate local ecologies and multispecies relations, but also have offered significant portrayals of the disintegration of the ecological fabric and tattering of ecospiritual and ecosocial relations. These latter works highlight the less than celebratory side of the colonial “welfare project” and extractive capitalism. Taken together, the early and the contemporary work could be considered a form of long-term environmentalism playing out across generations.

Indigenous communities in many parts of the world are currently engaged in decolonizing and revitalizing their cultures. While images such as Untitled (Composition with Taleelayu) can serve as illustrative guides to a more just and healthy multispecies future, works such as Untitled (Sedna by the Sea) acknowledge and bear witness to colonial and capitalist destruction of land, sea, humans, and their nonhuman kin, serving as a wake-up call to resist further destruction.

With the simple example above, I would suggest that Inuit art constitutes an exemplary case of long-term environmentalism. Turning now from the Arctic to New Mexico, where I live and work, between 2001 and 2006 bark beetles killed more than 50 million piñon trees in northern New Mexico; in some places about 90% of mature piñon perished. This was due to extreme warming and severe drought. I engaged with the epic loss at the time, which was presented as an exhibition, *Where I Live I Hope to Know*, at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in 2011.² I was interested not merely in the loss that was visible before me, but more importantly, the larger loss of nonhuman life that depended on the piñon, yet remained unquantified and therefore unseen—or so I thought at the time. Last year, a team of ornithologists published a study showing that following the piñon die-off between 2003 and 2013 in the northern New Mexico Pajarito Plateau, the diversity of birds dropped by 45% and their overall population by a staggering 73%. Two of my students, Leia Barnett and Diné artist Dylan McLaughlin, have now started to work collaboratively to engage with the crisis. In 2020, the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico will present an exhibition of work that I had created a decade earlier alongside work these students are now creating. The exhibition will be accompanied by a conference that will bring art, anthropology, archeology, botany, ornithology, critical geography, and indigenous

studies into dialogue across time. This intergenerational engagement might therefore be considered another instance of long environmentalism.

As climate breakdown and biological annihilation—the two most significant crises of our time—continue to intensify under the heavy pressure of varieties of structural violence, including capitalism, colonialism, and militarization, I am increasingly interested in intergenerational engagement. Art has a lot to offer.

Notes

¹ See Subhankar Banerjee, “Long Environmentalism: After the Listening Session,” in *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*, eds. Salma Monani and Joni Adamson (London: Routledge, 2016).

² See essays by Subhankar Banerjee and Jessica May in *Subhankar Banerjee: Where I Live I Hope to Know*, exh. cat. (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2011).