



GALLERIES



Samonie Toonoo's Sea Creature

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Scream: Ed Pien and Samonie Toonoo Connections between disparate artists illuminate in one of the year's best shows

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BY DAVID BALZER July 21, 2010 21:07

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To August 21. Monday-Saturdays, noon-5pm. Justina M Barnicke Gallery, 7 Hart House Circle. 416-978-8398. www.jmbgallery.ca

With her last curated exhibit at Justina M. Barnicke gallery, "Noise Ghost" featuring Toronto's Shary Boyle and Cape Dorset's Shuvina Ashoona, Nancy Campbell demonstrated the overlap of drawing and painting sensibilities between an expressionist urbanite (Boyle) and her far-north analogue (Ashoona). If you've got a mind for art history, that concept might seem redundant: since the turn of the last century, bourgeois artists have mined so-called primitivist aesthetics. Now, however, it's harder to make concrete statements about such things. Media have infiltrated the far north, for example; young artists in the south, raised on the tentative illustrative style of post-punk and indie-rock, do not often deliberately cite indigenous cultures as a reference point. In this way, the affinities between Boyle and Ashoona seemed both accidental and not at all surprising.

What Campbell did with "Noise Ghost," then, and what she does with her new show, "Scream," featuring Toronto's Ed Pien and Cape Dorset's Samonie Toonoo, is not to pick apart origins, but to say, simply, that when contemporary artists deal with consciousness, the resulting artwork can look quite similar, ethnicity and geography be damned. (Campbell's title comes from Munch's famous painting, the supposed quintessence of the fraught modern mind.) Pien's drawings — his "Mary Magdalene" is pictured at right — are visceral and scatological. (You might know him for his beautiful, intricate cut-paper works, the yin side of his practice.) Lines are scrawled; colours — pink, brown, red, yellow — are of the body; the subject matter, often queer, is reminiscent of Bosch and Burroughs, wherein sexual desire is both generative and destructive, and portrayed as corporeal possession. In one of the works here, *3-Minute Drawings*, there are knives, assholes and missing fingers; a tongue doubles as a phallus; a bed turns into a bum.



Toonoo, whose work is collected by Pien and his partner, artist Johannes Zits, is quieter about such themes, but looks on them equally unflinchingly. There is a lot of humour to his sculptures: the crass wit of *My Two Balls*, a figure holding two snowballs at his groin, runs against still-tenacious conceptions of Cape Dorset artists as naïve. Particularly intriguing are Toonoo's more traditional works combining antlers and stones, where the antler acts as a kind of speech bubble. In *Storyteller*, a stone man lies prostrate with the antler emerging from his mouth, tree-like, a materialization of inspiration — and of the immortality afforded by the titular profession. One of the best Toronto art shows of 2010, "Scream" does the same, not just making connections between two artists from disparate communities, but reminding us that good art is so frequently bigger — that is, more universal, foreboding and ambiguous — than the individual who produced it.

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