

White Liar and the Known Shore: Frobisher and the Queen (2021)

Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory and Jamie Griffiths

Summary Description

Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory (Inuk) and Jamie Griffiths (British-Canadian) bring together many aspects of the colonial story of Iqaluit challenging viewers to address the racism that perpetuates inequality for Inuit in their own homelands. The photograph is taken on the northern shore of Niaqunnguup Kangiqtungua, an inlet to 'Frobisher Bay' in Nunavut.

Bio

Jamie Griffiths and Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory are collaborating artists both based in Iqaluit, Nunavut.

Originally from the UK and a longtime resident of Vancouver, Jamie has created award-winning work that uses experimental tools and custom digital environments, digging into humanity's failings and triumphs, through autobiographical transparency and deliberate cultural confrontations.

Laakkuluk, a Greenlandic Inuk, uses *uaajeerneq* (Greenlandic mask dancing), poetry, theatre and performance art to tackle topics ranging from colonization, sexuality, intergenerational strength, fear, boundaries, and love. Laakkuluk is currently long-listed for the 2021 Sobey Art Prize. She is previously winner of the Sinchi Indigenous Award (2020), the Kenojuak Ashevak Memorial Award (2018) and co-winner of a Dora Mavor Moore Award (2018).

Jamie and Laakkuluk's recent works include a collaborative film installation called *Silaup Putunga* (2019), acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario for their permanent collection, and *Ikumagialiit*, a performance art show quartet with Cris Derksen and Christine Tootoo, commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada to premiere at the international Indigenous art exhibition *Abadakone* (2019). *Auk* (2021), a short film, is currently in the works for the National Arts Centre of Canada.

Artist Statement

Iqaluit is the capital city of Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, created by the land claims agreement negotiated between Inuit and the Canadian federal government in 1993. Iqaluit is located in Koojesse Inlet, a part of Inuit homelands, since time immemorial. The colonial settlement began as an American army base in WWII, growing during the Cold War into a townsite, named Frobisher Bay.

Sir Martin Frobisher, a 16th Century English explorer who made three voyages to the area, seeking the Northwest Passage (between Europe and Asia) and to establish an English colony in the Arctic, while also aiming to enrich his Queen's coffers (and his own) with gold. Elizabeth 1, Queen of England, commissioned Frobisher's endeavors and named the south Baffin Island he brought his fleets to '*Meta Incognita*' (*The Unknown Shore*). *Meta Incognita*, as

a concept, was designed to provide Elizabethan explorers with a 'moral' justification for settling new lands and can still be found on modern maps, alongside Inuktitut toponymy,

Frobisher's expeditions failed in all aspects. The Northwest Passage remained elusive. Plans for a new land settlement were abandoned due to loss of ships with essential supplies, and the deaths of seamen and carpenters. On his last trip, Frobisher brought 1350 tons of rock back to England that he believed to be gold. It turned out to be worthless hornblend - "fool's gold." Frobisher abducted three Inuit from the Qikiqtani region and brought them to Bristol in 1577 - Kalicho, Arnaq and her child, Nutaaq. They all died soon after arriving in England.

Although Iqaluit returned to its original Inuktitut placename in 1987 and the only remnants of the American Distant Early Warning site is a condemned barracks, the city itself is still a colonial epicentre in Inuit homelands, full of contradiction and paradox. The annual average income for Inuit is \$22,000, with non-Inuit incomes averaging \$110,000. While Inuit are supposed to be hired at representative percentages at all levels of government, most Inuit who are employed remain at the lower rungs of authority. While Inuktitut is an official language of Nunavut, it is rare to find children speaking Inuktitut in Iqaluit's playgrounds. Many Inuit have lived in substandard, inadequate and overcrowded Euro-Canadian housing since the time of colonization and yet empty housing units are commonly set aside for unfilled government jobs and transient workers from the south. Inuit have been forced into a position of poverty in their own homeland.

White Liar and the Known Shore: Frobisher and the Queen brings together many aspects of the colonial story of Iqaluit. The photograph is taken on the northern shore of Niaqunnguup Kangiqtunga, an inlet to 'Frobisher Bay.' The late spring sea ice is seen in a state of decay, melting a month earlier than usual.

Jamie has taken on the character of Frobisher dressed in white, to symbolize a White Liar.

A repeated theme in Jamie's works, the White Liar functions to expose the fallacies that those in power use in order to stay in power, using historical White Liars as characters to unveil the mechanics of racism. Frobisher carries the (phallic) tusk of an 'unknown' creature that he gifted to the Queen, birthing the myth of the unicorn. It is, in fact, a narwhal tusk - from a much cherished animal that Inuit have always hunted and eaten.

Laakkuluk is interpreting Queen Elizabeth 1. She is in White Face, simultaneously mimicking the make-up Elizabeth was famous for and harkening to whitened bones - an Inuit symbol of respect for ancestors. The black and red flagstaff use the colours of uaajeernej. Black is a symbol of the humility humans must strive for because of the unknowable immensity of the universe. Red is a symbol of a vulva - usurping the power Elizabeth held as "Virgin Queen."

An original 'fool's gold' rock, that sailed on Frobisher's ships to England, lies at Laakkuluk's left foot. It was returned to Iqaluit by Bristol-based artists Angela Piccini and Kayle Brandon and given to Janet Brewster (artist and Iqaluit's deputy mayor). Loaned to the artists for this artwork.

While this photograph examines historical events and aesthetics, it challenges contemporary viewers to see their own place in Arctic colonization. It asks white people and other non-Inuit in Iqaluit, what role they play in the ongoing industry of colonization that exists. Do you know where you are? What is your function in this city? What are you afraid of? How do you address racism within yourself and allow for Inuit decolonization in Iqaluit?

Links:

Jamie: www.jamiegriffths.com

Laakkuluk: www.laakkuluk.com

Acknowledgements:

Papatsi Kotierk - Costumer (Frobisher)

Cat Leahy - Hat Maker

Sheila Papa - Camera Assistant and for all the good living

Janet Brewster - Keeper of Frobisher's fool's gold

Angela Piccini/Kayle Brandon - Repatriation of Frobisher's fool's gold from Bristol to Iqaluit

Williamson Bathory kids - For their patience as they live in covid lockdown circumstances while their parents work.

Stephen Williamson Bathory - for everloving support