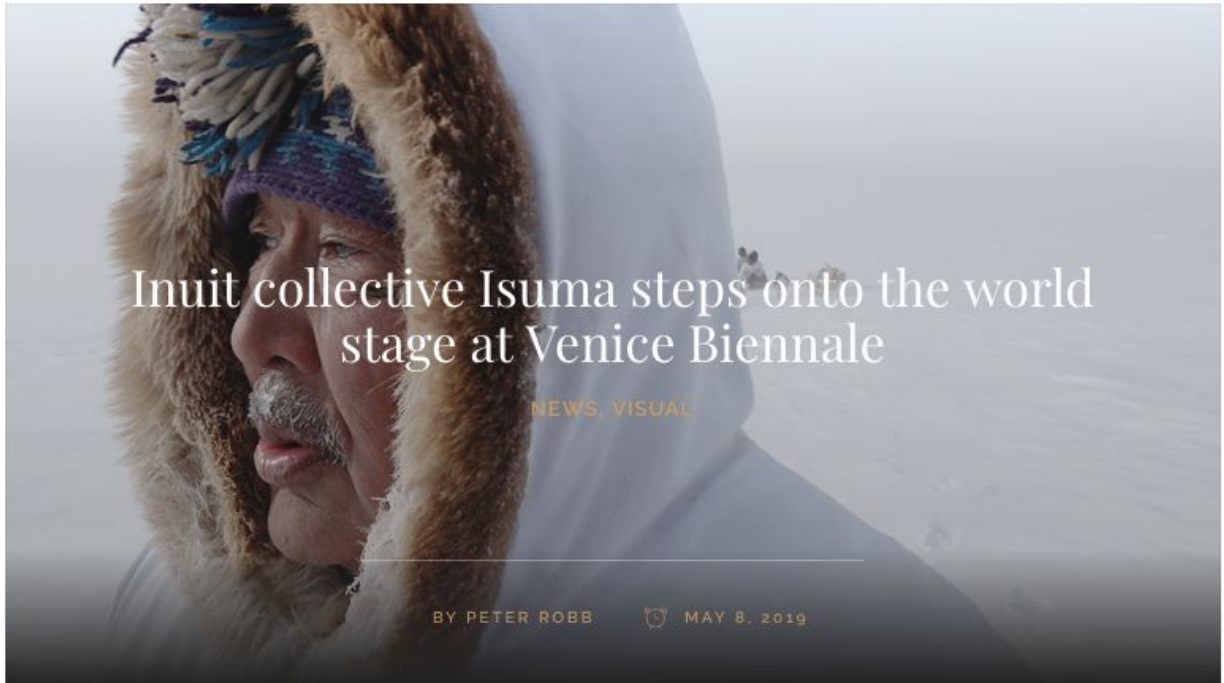


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A SCENE FROM THE ISUMA FILM ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF NOAH PIUGATTUK. COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

It has taken some 60 years for artworks by Inuit creators to appear as Canada's official entry in the most important exhibition of contemporary art the world, the [Venice Biennale](#).

That changes this week when work by the film and video collective [Isuma](#) opens to the public in Canada's recently renovated [pavilion](#).

Putting Isuma on the world stage "fills a big gap" in the pavilion's presentation of art made in Canada, says the National Gallery of Canada's Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, Josée Drouin-Brisebois, who is co-curator of the exhibition in Venice.



THE CANADA PAVILION IN VENICE. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA AND ISUMA DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL. PHOTO: FRANCESCO BARASCIUTTI

The opening this week is also being celebrated for a major donation of \$1 million by the [Jack Weinbaum Family Foundation](#) of Toronto that will support the production of major exhibitions at the Canada Pavilion in Venice. The announcement was made as the preview week of the 2019 event got underway.

Isuma, which means ‘to think’ in Inuktitut, was founded by [Zacharias Kunuk](#), [Paul Apak Angilirq](#) and [Norman Cohn](#) in Igloolik, Nunavut in 1990. It is best known in the public mind for the film, [Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner](#), which was the first ever film written, directed and acted entirely in [Inuktitut](#).

The collective is bigger today, numbering about 10 regular members, as is the scope of Isuma’s work which focuses on working to support and promote Canada’s indigenous community, especially Inuit, through television, the internet and film. Isuma was recently involved in the creation of the first ever [film](#) shot in

the Haida language with Haida actors, who had to relearn their language. They have produced some 7,000 films and videos and their works are collected in the National Gallery of Canada.

But this appearance in Venice is special, says Uyara 'Lucy' Tulugarik, who is one of the members of the collective. She acted in *The Fast Runner* and has been involved in many other Isuma projects.

"I am excited that's for sure," she told ARTSFILE. "I'll be glad to take part in representing Inuit with Isuma and Canada. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity."

The exhibition in Venice centres around a film called *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, written by Norman Cohn and directed by Zacharias Kunuk. It was filmed on location in north Baffin Island in 2018 recreates an encounter on Baffin Island in April 1961 when an Inuit family was ordered to move off the land. The controversial [relocation](#) still resonates as a sore point in Inuit-Canada relations.

Noah Piugattuk was a relative of Zacharias Kunuk. The film shows Noah being told his family was to be moved by a Canadian official known as Boss Man.

The film is the central piece in the exhibit — it is being shown on four massive monitors — and it makes an important point, Drouin-Brisebois believes.

"It shows that we have to be proud that we can have this conversation. You have to stand by your artists and the fact they can speak about their experiences. That's what reconciliation is."

For Lucy Tulugarik, Isuma is about allowing Inuit to speak and something more.

“For me, it gives me more opportunities to relive what was my childhood. Connecting with the animals around you and living off them and the land,” she said in an interview before heading to Venice.



INSIDE THE CANADA PAVILION WITH SCREENS SHOWING THE FILM ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF NOAH PIUGATTUK. PHOTO: FRANCESCO BARASCIUTTI. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA AND ISUMA DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL.

It also connects to the “songs, stories and legends, the costumes, the way the clothes were made by the elders using traditional designs.

“The old ways live on in the films. Me too. I was starting to forget some words too. I got them back though script writing with elders.”

Isuma puts community building at its heart, she said.

“We make and build friendships and connections and trust. Teamwork is very important for us.” This helps build communities that are struggling with addictions and suicide, she added.

“It is healing thing which we are trying to accomplish by putting stories on film. It is part of healing because we have similar emotions but often we don’t speak about it. Through the lens, you can recognize that all people have these feelings too.

“I have butterfly feelings about Venice. It’s getting closer. I will be true to myself whatever question comes, I’ll say the honest truth of what I have experienced with Isuma and all the works we do.

“I’m happy to be where I am and I am happy to be representing Isuma and the Inuit and the industry. I love film work. I feel good when I’m doing it. As a kid that was a dream and to present a film in a Canadian pavilion is like a gold medal to me.”

There is more to the Isuma exhibition in Venice.

Silakut Live from the Floe Edge is a live broadcast directed by Kunuk that will be seen in Venice during the exhibition. It is being shot on location in the same region in north Baffin Island and discusses issues confronting the people such as the impact of new mining projects on local Inuit communities.

For Isuma, the appearance in Venice comes in the midst, the collective said in a release, of “today’s contentious global media environment, when millions of people have been driven from their homes worldwide, Isuma media art in the UN

Year of Indigenous Languages sees the forced relocation of families from an Inuit point of view.” The broadcast can be seen on the Isuma website isuma.tv.

When the Isuma broadcast is not happening, the collective’s library of videos will be screened.

When you come to the pavilion, Drouin-Brisebois says, you first see Canada on one side of the building and Isuma (written in English and Inuktitut) on the other.

That shows the dichotomy right there, she said. The main feature film develops that tension further, she said.

“There isn’t common ground here. The film sets up a conflict and you start to understand that Inuit have a different way of dealing with conflict. They don’t like it. They don’t get angry and saying no is considered rude.”

She said the Isuma exhibition will offer a different way of experiencing a film because you walk through the pavilion instead of sitting in a chair in the dark eating popcorn. All the while, throughout the pavilion, you are surrounded by the sound.

Film is the dominant art form of the 20th and 21st century. But shown in this context, it’s more about the message of the films, videos and the broadcast, she said, that the special effects of a movie house.

The exhibition in Venice also tries to honour the values of Isuma which includes an emphasis on welcoming people.

“The exhibition design is intended to be free-flowing. You don’t have to sit in one spot and watch the film you can wander around.”

Another aspect of this welcoming is the fact that there are subtitles in Italian, along with English, French and Inuktitut. Many of the visitors to the pavilion in Venice are, obviously, Italian.

Drouin-Brisebois calls her work on the Isuma exhibition the most rewarding experience she has had as a curator and most educational experience as well.

“Things changed for me. I understood the media art of Isuma. I had encountered their work because it has been in the gallery’s collection for 20 years.”

“I understand the history of Isuma and what they were trying to do at a time when there was no voice for Inuit on film and video.”

Zacharias Kunuk, for example, started as a carver, she said. He sold one of his sculptures and bought a video camera. “This was in a community that voted against TV because didn’t want to have things from south if they weren’t hearing their language. Isuma was part of creating something so that Inuit could see themselves on TV and in film.”

Work is ongoing to bring the exhibition home to Canada, she said, details to come. The exhibition opens May 9 and runs until November.

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