

Venice Biennale 2019: Canadian pavilion's Isuma offers a quiet but direct retort to the great powers surrounding it

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Installation views of the artist collective Isuma at the Venice Biennale 2019.

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When you enter the Giardini della Biennale, the park-like exhibition grounds for the world's leading art show, you ascend an avenue that culminates in Gran Bretagna – the British pavilion. It is a classical building with high steps leading to a large portico where government officials can make appropriate speeches framed by imposing columns. Next door, the Canadian pavilion is a smaller modernist construction dating to the 1950s, tucked into an empty spot between Germany and Britain, an afterthought hiding behind the skirts of the imperial motherland.

At the Biennale's previews last week, one international art lover discovered she could pop out of the half-hour queue waiting to get up those steps and inside the British pavilion, and visit Canada for 10 minutes while friends held her spot. Back in line, she shrugged off the experience and ticked another country off the list of 90 in the program.

Oversized yet elitist, the Biennale has colonialism built into its architecture and consumerism embedded in its format. This year, Canada's contribution, a feature film and various videos from the Inuit collective Isuma, is a quiet but direct retort to that version of civilization. There is little evidence that the international art set prowling the Giardini looking for the hot new thing took any more interest in Isuma than it did in Roman Stanczak's deconstructed and reassembled plane in the Polish pavilion or the delicate paintings and drawings offered by Yamandu Canosa of Uruguay. To judge from the hours-long lines outside the French pavilion, Laure Prouvost's surreal installation of fish, birds and detritus plus dreamlike video was 100 times more important. Yet, for a Canadian viewer aware of the context in which Isuma is working, its contribution feels vital because it is so different from most of the art.

Although the central piece in the collective's presentation in the newly renovated Canada Pavilion is a scripted feature film, its approach is so factual and so committed to historical recreation of traditional Inuit life that the project feels refreshingly documentary in an international exhibition stuffed with whimsy and conceit. *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, a new film from Isuma director Zacharias Kunuk and his Montreal collaborator Norman Cohn, recreates the 1961 encounter between the semi-nomadic hunter and the government officer who will ultimately force him from the land and into the settlement at Igloolik, off Baffin Island.

The 112-minute film is playing in a continual loop in the pavilion but it forms merely the backbone of the presentation, which also includes the video *My Father's Land*, Kunuk and Cohn's 2014 documentary about Inuit traditions and the impact of the \$4-billion Mary River iron mine in the North Baffin region. Although that work shows the community hearings that took place before the mine opened, at the exhibition's preview last week Kunuk was beamed in by satellite interviewing Inuit hunters who complained about the mine and the disappearance of the caribou. In its installation, *Isuma* also raises concerns about a proposal to build a new railway for the mine across walrus breeding grounds, and asks whether there has been sufficient consultation. So, colonial history seems to be repeating itself – right next door to the great powers in their big pavilions.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that artists participating in the Biennale are not acutely aware of the social tensions inherent in the setting and the format. Indeed, the British artist Cathy Wilkes, who was born in Northern Ireland and lives in Glasgow, told the *Guardian* newspaper as her show was unveiled that she was uncomfortable with the very notion of countries and dislikes borders. Her elegiac work in the British pavilion, which includes ghostlike doll sculptures, pale, monochromatic paintings and abandoned antiques, is the antithesis of the monumental or triumphant. Both her work, and especially that of Prouvost next door in the French pavilion, refute the notion of art as something that offers the possibility of collection, consumption or competition.

Meanwhile, what would you do if you were a German artist asked to display your work in fascist architecture? Artist after artist has deconstructed the troubling German pavilion, which was rebuilt by the Nazis in 1938. This year, behind its heavy façade, Natascha Suder Happelmann (and a host of collaborators) present a series of ruins. The installation strews boulders about the floor, builds a massive dike-like wall in the midst of the space and asks visitors to sit beneath the scaffolding behind it to listen to a sound piece created by a piercing whistle. In the final room, there is a stack of unconstructed metal scaffolding poles, as though the artist at a certain point just had to give up.

These are subtle, dematerialized works that have little to do with the Biennale's nationalism nor its audiences' consumerism. Meanwhile, the ecological themes that *Isuma's* work suggests crop

up repeatedly in the Giardini. In the Nordic pavilion, a group of Finnish artists hang swathes of diaphanous material like vegetation and dot the floor with fabric boulders. Larissa Sansour's video work at the nearby Danish pavilion features an encounter between two women in a postapocalyptic shelter. And at the Japanese pavilion, a group of collaborators create Cosmo-Eggs, an installation built around a couchlike orange plastic circle that inflates like a lung while displays around it evoke various fictional islands. Texts and videos explain that the islands and their different cultures have learned to live in harmony with each other and nature.

It's not subtle, but that's a metaphor. What is striking about Isuma's presence at the Biennale is that there is nothing metaphoric nor symbolic about their work. In an exhibition filled with the attenuated and the elliptical, Isuma's purpose is readily apparent and its message clearly delivered. In Venice, Isuma brings an Inuit perspective to the world - if the world is willing to listen.