

First Look: Isuma at the Venice Biennale

By IAQ | May 8, 2019 | News

The *Inuit Art Quarterly* takes you behind-the-scenes of 58th Venice Biennale with a first look at Isuma's installation at the Canada Pavilion, which officially opened on Wednesday May 8, 2019 and marks the first time Inuit artists have exhibited as part of the national pavilion. The three-part installation revolves around the collective's most recent film *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019), the webcast *Silakut Live*—bringing the voices of the community of Iglulik, NU, to Venice, Italy—and an online collection of Indigenous language films.



Installation view of Isuma at the Canada Pavilion for the 58th International Art Exhibition/La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2019 COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA AND ISUMA DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL PHOTO FRANCESCO BARASCIUTTI

[Lucy Tulugarjuk](#), Assistant Director of *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* view in the Pavilion and who has worked with Isuma since early 1997, spoke in Inuktitut after the initial screening. “As the Isuma team, our goal is to preserve and protect our culture, our language and our way of life from our point of view,” she later stated in English. Her remarks followed honorary welcomes, including a message from the newly appointed Director and CEO of the National Gallery of Canada Dr. Alexandra Suda.



Exterior view of Isuma at the Canada Pavilion for the 58th International Art Exhibition/La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2019. COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA AND ISUMA DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL PHOTO FRANCESCO BARASCIUTTI

Tulugarjuk’s statement was echoed with additional remarks by visual artist, writer and curator [asinnajaq](#), Senior Curator of the Toronto Biennale Candice Hopkins and Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada Josée Drouin-Brisebois—three members of the 5-part curatorial team for the project, which also includes Barbara Fischer of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto and Catherine Crowston of the Art Gallery of Alberta.

“When we were making these [curatorial] decisions, we tried to ground ourselves in what we understood to be important to Isuma: community, knowledge, understanding and giving people space to think for themselves,” explained [asinnajaq](#) at the opening. “We also tried, throughout the different stages of curating the show, to use those values as a guiding place for us to work from.”

Central to the installation is the most recent Inuktitut-language film *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, directed by [Zacharias Kunuk](#), OC. The film stars Apayata Kotierk as Noah Piugattuk, the 61-year-old leader of a large clan of interrelated families at their camp Kapuivik in North

Qikuqtaaluk (Baffin Island), NU, and is based off the events relayed by Piugattuk himself. As the title suggests, the dramatized portrait revolves around a single, sun-filled day in May, 1961 hunting seals on the spring ice. “The film recreates a day and encounter in May 1961, when Inuit life on the land changed forever,” Isuma says in a collective statement. The 112-minute work is told in increments of two hours that progress across the 12 scenes of the film.



Visitors watch *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019) during the opening of the Canada Pavilion on May 8, 2019 at the 58th International Art Exhibition/La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2019 PHOTO INUIT ART FOUNDATION

From intimate moments sharing tea in the family’s *qammaq* to patiently hunting for seal near a breathing hole, their seemingly quotidian routine is soon disturbed when a strange dog team is spotted approaching the camp. Mr Wright, more commonly known as Boss, a government official stationed operating as regional administrator, diplomat, police and more to oversee the interest of Canada in Arctic, arrives with the hopes of convincing Piugattuk and his group to relocate to the settlement of Iglulik. What follows is series of negotiations and miscommunications that play out throughout the course of the 24 hour day.

“It was something of a failed negotiation,” adds co-curator Candice Hopkins during her remarks. “It also took place at a moment when Canada was at the front lines of the Cold War and when the Distant Early Warning (DEW) systems were being made. These listening stations across the Canadian Arctic were trying to intercept Cold War communication, meaning that Inuit were at the front line. This was a very local moment, but an incredibly important global moment.”

The film is installed across a number of screens mounted in supports throughout the curving interior of the Pavilion, while an additional monitor features behind-the-scenes footage from the production.

Alongside the film, a new experiment in online streaming *Silakut Live* relays live webcasts to the Pavilion and online from the community of Iglulik as well as the surrounding wilderness, focussed on the impact and benefits of the proposal to build a railroad across Qikuqtaaluk by Baffinland Iron Mines to ship 30 million tons of iron ore annually. The live stream will feature conversations with hunting families from the community discussing the proposal that will intersect walrus breeding grounds, in view from Kapuivik where Piugattuk's camp was based in the early 1960s.



Cast and Crew on set of *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019) COURTESY ISUMA DISTRIBUTION INTERNATIONAL PHOTO LEVI UTTAK

“*Silakut Live* brings global media transparency to the consequences of forced relocation to viewers in Nunavut, Venice, Canada and worldwide,” says Isuma. The live stream will run from May 8 to 11, 2019, with additional times and dates to follow, and can be viewed at the Canada Pavilion in Venice, Italy, the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton, AB, the Cinéma Moderne in Montreal, QC as well as on [IsumaTV](#).

In tandem with the physical installation and broadcasts, the collective is occupying digital space with critical essays, scripts, background information, behind-the-scenes photographs, the complete archive of Iglulik's Inuktitut video production since 1985 and more than 7,000 international Indigenous films and videos in 75 languages on [IsumaTV](#).

“Isuma’s exhibition in Venice coincides with the United Nations’ International Year of Indigenous Languages, offering an unprecedented opportunity to share Inuit-language creative production on a global stage,” says the National Gallery of Canada in a press release.