

Two Worlds

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TWO WORLDS

Curtis J. Collins



David Ruben Piqtoukun is a Toronto sculptor whose most recent stone installation captures the essence of the struggles faced by our nation's aboriginal and ethnic communities. *The Gateway to Understanding* was created by the 41 year-old artist from Paulatuk, Northwest Territories to commemorate the Earth Spirit Festival held in Toronto on July 5, 6, & 7, 1991.

Inuit, North American Indians, and Japanese Canadians gathered at the city's Harbourfront to participate in a cultural exchange which featured a unique blend of events, including a musical performance by Kashtin, a lecture by David Suzuki, and Piqtoukun's site-specific piece.

Iko Suzuki approached the artist last winter with an offer to create a permanent sculpture which could embrace the Festival's environmental /spiritual theme. Piqtoukun proceeded to explore the Harbourfront district, among the condominiums, luxury hotels, marinas, and corporate towers the artist was able to find a power centre. "As I walked through the trees in this little parkette a huge gust of wind came up — I lost my footing — and was in snow up to my ears. I figured this is the spot, it has an energy" On a tiny strip of land overlooking Lake Ontario, and in the shadow of the CN Tower and Skydome, Piqtoukun would conceive a work of art that symbolized the three cultural groups' eternal connection to the earth.

The artist envisioned an installation comprised of massive stones placed strategically throughout the site. In the spring Piqtoukun went *rock shopping* at a quarry in Wyarton, Ontario, and on his third trip to the Bruce Peninsula he found the *right stones*. The seven metamorphic boulders, composed of marble, dolomite, and limestone were shipped to Toronto in the summer. It took the artist three weeks to complete the memorial; using a crane he carefully positioned each piece of glacially formed material.

The Gateway to Understanding incorporates elements from the belief systems of three distinct societies, in an attempt to stimulate a greater exchange between people of all origins. Four boulders located on the

ground in a square configuration, mark the cardinal points. The four directions were an integral part of the North American Indian culture, exercising a vital role in their mythology. The artist learned from a local Mississauga Indian that this area of Toronto's waterfront was referred to as "spudna", and it was a sacred place where his ancestors performed ceremonies 400 years ago. Located in the centre of

the square are two boulders sunk vertically into the earth, which support a third boulder horizontally placed. This part of the installation functions as a Shinto gate, an architectural form utilized by the indigenous religious cult of Japan which revered the spirits of natural forces. The entire installation also operates as an Inukshook, referring to the ancient Inuit practice of piling rocks in order to create guide posts throughout the North. Piqtoukun's fusion of cultural icons is ultimately a post-modern comment upon the multi-racial complexion of Canadian society.

It acknowledges the importance of aboriginal heritage within the context of contemporary existence, acting as bridge between the past and the future. As an artist of Inuit ancestry David Ruben Piqtoukun has had to grapple with the problems of living in two worlds. He began his artistic career twenty years ago as a carver in Paulatuk, but in 1981 he left his small community on the Beaufort Sea for Toronto. The artist continued to create figurative stone sculptures depicting traditional Inuit life and mythology, and it is this type of work which remains as the dominate force in his current artistic production. However, Piqtoukun is not satisfied with being restricted to one form of artistic expression, and he is slowly venturing into the field of conceptual art. "I want to have a freedom of expression, and break the stigma attached to Inuit art. I would like to be considered first as an artist — and as an artist I happen to be Inuit — and I'm proud of it"

Piqtoukun has created site-specific works in Edmonton, Kleinburg, Washington, Inuvik, and Ottawa. Each of these works strikes a distinctive balance between North American and Western European aesthetic traditions. His most recent piece in Toronto is directly related to the Inukshook, an Inuit form of art that has existed for thousands of years, and yet it also refers to the Western inspired development of post-modern installation art. "Taking rocks and piling them up is like writing in stone, rather than using words you make your symbolism in stone" The artist's employment of conceptual meanings in this work of art place it within the framework of contemporary aesthetics, and Piqtoukun's particular manipulation of the installation idea is distinctly Inuit.

The problem of locating Inuit art in the mainstream of Canadian art is a task the Art Gallery of Ontario has recently taken up. Three years ago Norman Zepp was appointed curator of the newly formed Inuit art department, and he is responsible for educating the AGO's public as to the fine art value of works by Canada's northern aboriginal population. For decades modern Inuit art has been treated as an anthropological curio by institutions, curators, and collectors, the marginalization of this art amounts to aesthetic racism. Artists such as David Ruben Piqtoukun have contested the limitations placed upon Inuit art, and fought to expand their work beyond the puritanical confines of "traditional" forms and subject matter.

Piqtoukun's journey towards artistic freedom is a hazardous trip which demands that he maintain an equilibrium between two worlds. In many respects *The Gateway to Understanding* captures the duality

of this artist's existence. Passing through the gate from the south a viewer is faced with two overwhelming symbols of our technological age: the CN Tower and the Skydome. Entering the gate from the north a viewer gazes upon a collection of earthly wonders: a grove of trees, Lake Ontario, and in the distance the lush green of Toronto Island. Each of the four directional boulders serve as rest areas for the viewer from which to contemplate the natural and manufactured environments. The artist enjoys living in Canada's largest urban centre, however he makes regular visits back to his birthplace in the Arctic. "I need wide open spaces to keep my mind clean, and keep my concepts going. The Arctic seems like a different world, and you can't lose that connection. It's like trying to live in two worlds — you can do it — but it's not easy".

The Harbourfront installation seeks to reclaim nature's power within the urban landscape. Piqtoukun is quick to point out the variety of mosses growing on the surfaces of his art and the animal burrows beneath each of the boulders. His genuine respect for organic life is an essential part of this installation, a quality that is absent in many of the environmentally based installations which prevail upon the contemporary Canadian art scene.

A lack of reverence for the earth is evident in a recent outdoor installation by Fastwürms located on the other side of the dome from Piqtoukun's piece. *The Birch Hive* attempts to recreate a natural existence which is based upon the group's vision of a new environmental world order. On their infamous journeys to the forests of Northern Ontario the Toronto threesome collect organic materials for their art. A central birch bark structure on a rectangular strip of grass is surrounded by bronze information plaques set in the sod, which espouse the Fastwürms' prophetic dogma. Compared to Piqtoukun's stone installation *The Birch Hive* appears contrived, for it is not able to fabricate an empathy for the earth that is a genuine part of *The Gateway to Understanding*.

The artist from Paulatuk deftly orchestrates the inherent energy of his materials and site, and addresses issues of critical importance to our society. His ruggedly cut boulders exude a primal power that transforms a small piece of land in a concrete jungle into a haven of serenity. This unique assemblage of massive stone holds a conceptual relation to the indigenous beliefs of the Inuit, North American Indians, and Japanese Canadians, which honor the earth spirit. Piqtoukun's piece strives to open up an exchange between people of different racial backgrounds. "As you walk through the gateway — you open up your mind — and break the barriers of cultural resentment".

The Gateway to Understanding transcends the restraints placed upon Inuit art, and it deserves recognition as an important work by a post-modern artist in Canada. This Precambrian rock installation on Toronto's waterfront functions as a natural sanctuary for the public in a metropolitan centre, and serves as a personal guidepost for its creator. David Ruben Piqtoukun's art effectively unites the aesthetics of two worlds, allowing him to freely express his respect for the earth and humanity. "Through dialogue and cultural exchange tolerance

and understanding awaken within us. This structure will stand tall and bold as a symbol of the earth spirit".♦

1 Artist's statement from a plaque affixed to the south directional boulder of the installation. — All quotes are derived from a conversation between the author and the artist on October 1, 1991.

L'auteur rend compte d'une installation in situ, érigée par David Ruben Piqtoukun dans le port de Toronto. L'oeuvre a été réalisée dans le cadre du Festival de l'esprit de la terre qui s'est déroulé en juillet dernier, une manifestation visant à favoriser les échanges culturels entre les Inuit, les Amérindiens et les Canadiens d'origine japonaise. Intitulé *The Gateway to Understanding* (Passage vers l'entente), le monument intègre des éléments issus des croyances des trois groupes indigènes et ce, en référence directe avec le spirituel et l'environnemental. Des blocs de pierre symbolisent une arche d'entrée tandis que d'autres, posés à des points précis, constituent des jalons orientés vers les divers environnements naturels et construits du site. À plusieurs égards, l'oeuvre est à l'image même de la dualité que vit Piqtoukun, obligé qu'il est de fonctionner dans deux mondes différents. D'une part, il y a cet acharnement qu'il déploie pour maintenir un lien avec son lieu d'origine, Paulatuk dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest, et de l'autre, le fait qu'il soit installé en permanence à Toronto. Son installation fait le pont entre deux traditions esthétiques, combinant les philosophies de l'art de l'Europe de l'Ouest et de l'Amérique du Nord. Par le biais de l'approche conceptuelle, l'artiste trouve une réponse au problème des différences culturelles qui animent notre société contemporaine, tout en jouant avec l'idée d'installation d'une manière distinctement inuit. De ce fait, son oeuvre pointe la nécessité de réévaluer les préjugés qui prévalent encore sur l'art des Inuit, et, de par son ampleur, elle apporte une reconnaissance certaine à un important artiste postmoderne d'ici.

David Ruben Piqtoukun, *The Gateway to Understanding*, 1991 (Detail). Photograph : Liana Radvak.