

Intimate Spirits of Places

Somewhere in the circumpolar Arctic, along the 55th parallel north, those who dwell there, established on the eastern shore of the Hudson Bay, are giving us a fragment of landscape.

This book of photographs reveals the Inuit landscape sensibility of the inhabitants of Umiujaq. The community, one of many in Nunavik which have long been perceived through the exterior veil of the Canadian Great North, is today undergoing both intense media focus and increasing evolution of its landscapes. The clearly visible physical mutation of these northern landscapes of Quebec is mainly caused by factors such as global warming, urbanization in the form of coastal villages, the exploitation of natural resources as well as various projects to open up the area (infrastructure) and preserve its nature (national parks). At the same time, the practices of the indigenous population and the way they see their own landscapes have also changed: the people have

sedentarized, they have developed new recreational habits while maintaining more traditional ones, and typically show a penchant for the consumption of foreign images seen on tv, in films or on the internet. This exogeneous production of images however still offers a representation of the landscape beauties of the Great North that fits its own value criteria.

The interest of this photography collection gathered during a “Landscape” Photography Contest in Umiujaq in 2010 lies not only in the collection mode itself but also in the sensibility of expression it delivers. The “contest” mode is very common in Nunavik. Based on willing participation it allows personal emulation within a collective action.

During the year 2009-2010, 63 snapshots were submitted and collected — a participation rate averaging 15% of the community. While the contest form was familiar the nature of the production requested was original, namely the creation of images in a traditionally oral society which nowadays consumes many images via the media. Only emerging, the indigenous iconographic production (films and documentaries) is no rival yet to the general public’s representations moulded by allochthonous westerners.

This photography contest on landscape preferences in Umiujaq is a window opening onto a subarctic landscape

as perceived and enjoyed by its inhabitants in 2010, gently lifting the western, mythical veil of the Canadian Great North. A window on a territory where a National Natural Park Project is being planned for the creation of both conservation and development areas. From this kaleidoscope of views we embrace a perimeter of 25,000 square kilometers, covering more than the Tursujuq National Park Project (15,000 sqkm) in order to take in the places and content of the landscape emotions included in the project and excluded from it. These indigenous photographs reveal intimate *genius loci*, i.e. sensitive values given to certain places, responding, at a given moment and for the indigenous people, to the gathered presence of certain forms, certain shapes, certain lights. So, naturally, in these “spirits of places” caught unaware, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the permanent and the ephemeral sometimes meet and sometimes melt.

What does this contest bring to the idea of landscape?

The name of the contest and the fact that it emphasized “beautiful” landscapes have caused the inhabitants of Umiujaq to present pictures filled only with the positive value of their landscape preferences. There is no trace of landscapes they might not care for. Landscape is a

contemplative continuity which may or may not happen between us and our environment. This potential relationship is aesthetic which, according to the Greek etymology of the word, engages our five senses in meeting the beauty of the world. Indeed landscape manifests itself in a reciprocal amplification of people and place, creating a particular resonance in the state of being and in the location.

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Landscape constitutes a fragment of identity, a hedonist satisfaction that reaches beyond the fulfillment of a need, mutually belonging to what we are and what nature is, two consenting dispositions. This state of harmony felt in a given place at a given time, sometimes recreated to be

satisfied again, presupposes a visual selection and consequently a concentration or a separation of frequentation on some territories. This geographical phenomenon can be found in the Tursujuq National Park which bears traces of mixed frequentation. The park has played host to criss-crossing episodes generated by different cultures travelling to different locations, thereby influencing the evolution of landscape practices and perceptions.

Only a few allochthonous gazes met with those of the Inuit and Cree during the first trading posts on the mouth of the Little Whale River, and south of the Richmond Gulf from the 18th century until the first half of the 20th century. Another centre of gravity then crystallised around the creation of the Umiujaq village on the Hudson Bay and north of the Richmond Gulf in 1986. Finally the current park project, aimed at creating an ensemble of Quebecan national parks in Nunavik, in close partnership with the Inuit, foreshadows a new frequentation, with practices and perceptions emanating from non-indigenous, “visiting” tourists who are likely to travel and trek through the territory and its landscapes.

Such dynamics are culture, space and time-related : they generate polarities of landscape expressions that not only evolve through time but can also diverge on a similar

location, according to the perceptions of the cultural groups and the various uses they will make of the landscape. As a result affective cartographies appear to overlap, with possible points of competition or over-frequentation. Hence the interest of understanding the “inside” and the “outside” of this aesthetic and practical matrix: that of the inhabitants and that of the future visitors.

Many available sources, whether written (literature, press, websites, tourist guides) or oral (tales, interviews) already show the landscape representations held by social and cultural groups. However, image remains an interesting, non-verbal, figurative tool to question landscape. The word image is etymologically rooted to the word “imaginary”, *imago*, i.e. a visual re-presentation of elements chosen to create meaning. The commonly exogenous landscape illustration of the Great Canadian North is here faced with an autochthonous photographic production, complementing the existing expression of oral tradition, allowing the inhabitants of Nunavik, the Nunavimmiut, to finally make visible their perception of landscape.

These landscape preference images as proposed by the inhabitants of Umiujaq are interesting to be shared and compared with those that can be seen, for example, on

the Nunavik National Parks website, or in the territory's tourist guides.

What do the pictures bring to our knowledge of the Inuit world?

There doesn't seem to be a specific term to translate the word "landscape" into inuktitut but during the public events where every participant handed in their picture the term was associated to the word "nuna", literally "our land" in inuktitut, or "home" or "homeland". The relationship the Inuit have with the animist world lies on a continuity between the living and the non-living, linked with a common spirituality. The tangling of souls with physical envelopes weaves narrow threads where the beauty of landscape indicates a possible path for the souls. Nature being no stranger to the Inuit sense of humanity, the sacred dimension is hardly detectable in the pictures, whereas the aesthetic intention is plain to see.

No figurative ambiguity was found around the subject of "landscape" in the contest. The participation rate and the content of the images show the Umiujaq inhabitants' responsiveness to the sparkle of their land which reflects that of their people and their practices.

Unlike the sculptures and prints that dominate the Inuit art, photography enables a “realistic” visualisation of landscape. Indeed sculptures and etchings do not convey the figuration of an identifiable landscape (absence of background) since the object of their representation is an action and its relation to the different parts. Consequently this production of photographic images gives an identifiable outlook on the places of nature the Umiujaq community cares for.

As far as locations are concerned, when a closer look is taken, four zones of concentration, four emblematic sites stand out of all the photographed sites (cf. map). In order of importance the pictures show two clear preferences : one on the shoreline and the Nastapoka falls site, and the other on a section of the Hudson Bay, where the village and the Gillies islands face each other. The Nastapoka falls are featured 10 times, and always from the same, frontal angle. All put forward the formidable scale of the falls tearing down the coast, the spectacle, seen or felt, of bursting water and the light effects created. The coastline section facing the village is also represented in 10 pictures, 7 of which look out onto the islands while 3 of them show the village. Notice that all the Hudson Bay landscapes are shown at sunrise, with the islands tracing a black horizon line that duplicates the blazing sun and the

sea where it is reflected. The two other apparently emblematic zones in the number of photographs are located around the Richmond Gulf, more specifically the northern sector near the village, as well as the southern sector and the mouth of the Little Whale River.

The northern part of the gulf, by far the most represented (17), mainly corresponds to the different views that can be taken from the unique path suitable for motor vehicles leading from the village to the gulf. In this first zone more specific landscape portrayals can be drawn : the sweeping, plunging view on the north-end of the Gulf (4), taken from the break-of-slope in the path that leads to the gulf (south angle), close shots on the string of *cuestas* (4) and more particularly the first two which, from this point of view look like twins or festooned lace configured as a long, thin line (south to north angle). Other shots reveal the presence of geological curiosities such as isolated blocks, or a “claw” or “hoof” sculpted in a slope by gully erosion, or again the assembling games of the layer stratification.

In the south and south-east part of the gulf two other zones seem to gather similar interest. The site of the first trading post on the Little Whale River (3), looking north, integrates the running stream in the foreground and in the background, the profile of a *cuesta* in the shape of a nose

facing East. This is the sign of an autochthonous appropriation of the site, prior or posterior to the first trading post. Pictured in summer the southern coast section of the gulf located between Cairn Island and the Goulet (not shown) appears as a dazzlingly indented shoreline (3), while the other southern coast sites represented mostly focus on the Troyes river also in summer (3). Two emblematic gulf shores frame the last trading post, without representing it, showing here a non-appropriation of the place by the indigenous.

This synthetic geographical outlook of landscape preferences of the inhabitants of the Umiujaq community therefore reveals places that represent a special source of inspiration on the territory. It also shows that other, apparently strategic parts of the territory seem to raise less interest : the Umiujaq rock for instance is not represented even though it has given its name to the village. No presence either of the Goulet which coordinates the ebbs and flows of the Richmond gulf via the Hudson Bay, the last trading post and the coastal path of the Hudson Bay, excluding the section facing the village and the Nastapoka river waterfall.

As regards the content chosen to feature in the pictures, two main trends can be observed, sometimes in conjunction, two orders of “magnitude” which sublimate

the emotion of the Umiujaq landscapes : a definite visual option for elements that elevate the structural permanence of the landscape in its imposing physical forms on the one hand, and a penchant on the other hand for instantaneous atmospheres imbuing the landscape with the quality of passing surprise.

Landscape constitutes a fragment of identity, a hedonist satisfaction that reaches beyond the fulfillment of a need, mutually belonging to what we are and what nature is, two consenting dispositions.

It is noticeable that the geological forms, especially their scales, their remarkable shapes and/or their textures are a recurrent feature. This dimension of the timeless grandeur of stonelife is epitomized in the repeated choice to show the Nastapoka fall and the monumental cuestras (400 m overhang) as well as its derived landforms (mounds and

boulders) or the careful attention paid to the rock's stratification.

This part of Nunavik is undeniably and remarkably shaken by its geomorphology, radically different from the horizontal domination of the flat-topped, eroded Canadian shield which characterizes Northern Quebec. This hasn't passed by the inhabitants who continue to find in the place a renewed source of inspiration and amazement. The scale of such landforms is often magnified by the reflection of water or the presence of a character serving as a measuring unit (3). The internal waters, whether calm (the "mirroring" lake) or flowing (river or waterfall) are often combined. One can't help but feel drawn in by the soundscape, be it suspended silence or loud, gushing waters.

The rock and water seem to incarnate "mother earth" and their multiple entanglements recall the particularity of the Umiujaq landscapes. But although depicted as motherly, the nordic land is little seen with its fauna (3) and few trees (3) — Umiujaq stands at the edge of the trees — hidden away in shelter from the wind and the cold.

These portrayals of rock and water, at once singular, majestic and immutable are presented as if animated by two principal life movements, the seasons of the year and the lights of the day.

A predominance of “green” over “white” can be observed, summer over winter, with few snowy landscapes (11) when compared with the number of grassy ones. This observation does come as a surprise and contradicts the western mythical image of a Great Arctic White. This could be accounted for by the fact that the inhabitants photographed the landscape just before the contest ended, in August. However it turns out that most participants had searched through their existing photographic repertoire to which winter belongs. As a result it can be said that the Inuit subarctic landscape reality integrates its winterly identity only as it is, i.e. merely a part of the year. For the Inuit the explosion of spring and summertime vegetal growth sparks very symbolic astonishment at the subarctic seasonal rhythm as it uncovers the white mantel of snow wrapped over the winterly landscapes. Finally the responsiveness to sunsets (9, among which all the Gillies islands pictures facing west of the village) and thermic effects of light (rainbow, mist, reflections) is very obvious. Such intense colours or irradiating and raking light effects immortalize the Nordic daily landscapes and its precious, passing moments.

Beyond the choice of shapes, dimensions, textures and colours, the social dimension of the landscape features as another frequently represented theme (10). Many photos

show characters and/or meaningful elements of human life in the landscape, such as the village (3), the settlements (3), public gatherings, the fishing boat, the fish smoking on the pebbly shore.

These selected pieces of landscapes are closely linked to traditional and contemporary practices in which either nature or civilisation rules :

— The village and the corollary sedentary lifestyle of the population has shortened the extent of the travelled space and allowed for an increased appreciation of nearby environment. Reciprocally the site of the settlement which dates back to 1986 is no coincidence : it is the shortest and most direct link between the sea and the gulf with a pass through the cuestas. The sedentary process also announces recreational practices which set the pleasure of contemplation aside from that of fishing, hunting and gathering.

— The Richmond Gulf site concentrates many attractive features of the same level of interest as those found in the Hudson Bay. Its northern part especially offers the only direct route to the village — the other way via the Goulet is a long detour — framed by the spectacle of cuestas.

— The south coast of the village which, despite the attraction of the sea for the Inuit, presents a reversed

geological form with *cuestas* turning their back to the Hudson Bay, overlooking the Richmond Gulf and directing its attractiveness inland.

— The snow and the ice certainly facilitate the comings and goings of the Inuit. But have they become so obvious that they no longer represent an original expression of their landscape? Isn't the symbolism of seasonal change more meaningful to the Inuit who perceive and enjoy the two alternating faces of their landscapes the whole year long?

Or is the fact of expressing the reality of five months of snow in this subarctic latitude a kicking into touch of the so-far-domineering western myth of the Arctic? For a Westerner this might be as disconcerting as remembering that Greenland actually comes from... "green land".

What do the contest pictures bring to the knowledge of the Tursujuq National Park territory and more generally to the creation of a National Park?

In the context of a National Park Project, in this case that of Tursujuq, this type of photographic collection is an addition to the existing data on landscape, acquired for the regulatory preparatory documents.

Like in Tursujuq, the natural landscapes chosen to carry the project of a National Park are typically identified by physical geography. In Tursujuq for instance they are characterized by three landscape units, corresponding to three natural locations: the Hudsonian cuetas overlooking the Richmond Gulf, the Hudson plains scarified by rivers and the Clearwater, Iberville and Wolf lakes. But, as stated above, the landscape is more than the physical incarnation of the territory, it is also a sensitive geography represented through an aesthetic and functional matrix. The same space can consequently refer to several landscapes, depending on the observing party.

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By showing the values given to the local people's landscapes this kaleidoscope of photographs taken by the Umiujaq inhabitants suggests a few possible orientations for the Tursujuq park but also for any other project

involving the turning of nature into a cultural heritage in the circumpolar region.

This method can be very operational as a participative tool when choosing a perimeter, or deciding on interior zoning — defining the uses and icons to be seen — or again devising communication for the “display” of landscape. Urging the local population to deliver their internal representations of landscapes allows us to discover and interrelate imaginary, affective and aesthetic mental repertoires of the North.

Furthermore, picturing the indigenous landscapes is also a creative stimulation to become the craftsperson of one’s own daily landscape, renewing and perpetuating the imaginary of the North, a mix of tradition and modernity, of cultures and, today, of globalisation.

As a result these intimate spirits of places of the Umiujaq community portray sublime and ordinary faces of a Great North. They underline the indigenous’ awareness of the originality of this Nunavik territory, especially its landform of “reversed” cuestas which cut through the horizontal domination of the land, and its interior gulf which brings great attractiveness to the innermost shoreline. And finally winter, with its snowy landscapes, does seem to remain an emblematic but not a determining or exclusive feature. Little white, no northern lights, no inuksuk... so what?

The inhabitants are brought face to face with a new awareness: the possibility of maintaining, deflecting, correcting or simply participating in the pictorial representation of their landscape and what they want to show of it, whether it fits or misfits the media representation they have of it. This renewed awareness can also extend to the allochthonous actors and visitors of the future park who subconsciously long to find in the park a landscape repertoire based on that of the *Wilderness* and the polar myth of the Great White.

And so go all of the world's landscapes, populated by innumerable latent truths. If the truth that emerges from this fragment of a Great Canadian North can catch the western onlooker off guard, it invites them to simply commune with it.