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Review Essay

Eskimo Art: A Review Essay

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Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska. By Dorothy Jean Ray. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977. 298 pp. $29.95.

Pitseolak: Pictures Out of My Life. Edited by Dorothy Eber. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979. 96 pp. pap. $5.95.

Since its first, tentative, appearance in the shops and galleries of southern Canada and the U.S. in the 1940s, "Eskimo art" has become big business. In parts of the eastern Arctic and Alaska, its sale is now the major source of income for the otherwise impoverished natives. White enthusiasm for Eskimo carvings and prints, the two most popular Eskimo art forms, has derived, in part, from an awareness that purchase of Eskimo goods helps these Eskimos to survive. At the same time some whites believe that, by purchasing art that is distinctly "Eskimo," they help preserve a dying culture. Euro-American guilt over the destruction of traditional Eskimo life and well-being is thus mitigated by the purchase of durable symbols of the vanishing Eskimo way of life.

When any new or newly "discovered" body of artworks makes a major impact on the art market, numerous books on the subject inevitably follow. Such has been the case for Eskimo art. Most of these books—and articles—have played, understandably, to the leading motives for "appreciating" Eskimo products by either emphasizing the improved economic circumstances of the producers or discussing their imagery in terms of old lifestyles and beliefs. For the more mercenary art collector, dealer and museum concerned for their investments, the literature affirms the high "aesthetic quality" of the style. Seldom have the books dealt openly with the historic events that brought the art into being, however, and seldom have they been sensitive to the full effects of these on that art and its creators. The intent clearly has been instead to enhance the value and desirability of Eskimo art by focusing on its noncontroversial features,

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thus avoiding data that could leave the reader with unexpiated doubts and guilt.

Two recent publications have succeeded, however, in adding more subtle and profound, albeit disquieting, dimensions to the study of Eskimo art. And while, in terms of size and scope, the two differ greatly, in their implications they have much in common. Dorothy Ray, a white American anthropologist, provides in *Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska* the most detailed historical reconstruction to date of the postcontact art of a specific Eskimo area. Ray, in this latest of her well-known publications, discusses the changing forms and production of north Alaskan art from the last days of the Birnik-Thule tradition (at the end of the eighteenth century) to the present. The sixty-six page text, accompanied by 307 high quality black and white illustrations, and a bibliography and index, is divided into four chapters, the two most extensive dealing with "traditional art" (pre-1950s) and "market art" (post-1950). In both, the author groups the art objects of the period by medium or technique and, within these, by style, subject or use. The book is notable for including techniques of sewing and basketry, both traditional women's art forms, and the perishable (and hence non-marketable) media of ice, frost and feathers. Such a welcome expansion of the definition of art better to conform to ethnic reality is unprecedented in North American Indian art studies of recent years.

Ray's knowledge of her material is extraordinary. She seems equally comfortable with ethnohistoric documents, working artists, and actual objects, and she can converse on the latter's regional variations in form and usage as easily as on the history of their collection. Her discussions of the subject and meaning of the pieces are refreshingly terse and non-speculative, moreover; a pragmatist, she spends little time on that which she can not document. Probably her most important contribution, however, appears under her subheading of "projects and programs" in her chapter on market art, where she documents the recent rise (and typical fall) of numerous subsidized organizations and programs designed to enhance the marketability of North Alaskan Eskimo art. Here, despite a distinct disinclination to moralize, Ray manages to convey her own unhappiness with an increasing Eskimo catering to the white man's often specious tastes. Obviously sympathetic to the Eskimos' need to earn cash with their carvings, Ray nonetheless laments: "Never before had I been so aware how much the carver had been limited, not by himself or his own creativeness, but by the limitations of his marketplace and his customers" (p. 69). She documents as evidence numerous instances of white tampering with native designs and the personal frustrations of the artists whose creativity has been thus restricted.

To Ray's mind, the fact that the manipulation of Eskimo art by the white market was already pronounced by the 1870s means that the concept of modern Eskimo art as we define it is, alas, fallacious. Fatalistically she implies that the process of white deculturation of the Alaskan Eskimo is essentially finished; there is simply nothing left of traditional Eskimo life to perpetuate in art. What we think is Eskimo in native Alaskan art is therefore always contrived, if not downright phony, and the art thus lacks integrity for both producer and consumer. Not one for regrets or condemnations, Ray concludes from this understanding that we should free the Eskimo artist from the ethnic bondage in which we have placed him. The Eskimo should be allowed to join the white mainstream artworld, with its formalist aesthetic—as an artist and not a member of an ethnic group. Henceforth, says Ray, Eskimo art should be judged solely on the basis of its "artistic merit," and not, as at present, on the basis of its presumed "Eskimoness."

Although Ray's book raises some disturbing questions and draws an almost radical conclusion, its impact is not as negative as one might think. There is, after all, a sense of relief to be gained from learning that the process of destruction of Eskimo culture is finally over; believing that it is over permits us to divest ourselves of guilt for our on-going complicity. Denying the Eskimo his ethnicity, in other words, obscures the boundary between "them" and "us" and the fact that we may be still in conflict with a set of values and a lifestyle that are "Eskimo." That Ray really speaks for only a small number of distinctly urban, often academically trained, Alaskans, in fact, is apt to be overlooked in her readers' likely enthusiasm for her pronouncements. The danger in generalizing Ray's conclusions and advice is that they pertain largely to the contemporary craftsmen of Nome; thus they distract us from the ecological and socio-economic damage being done to *other* Alaskan Eskimos by, among other things, government whaling bans and transcontinental pipelines. And they cannot be applied to the continuing process of deculturation of Canadian Eskimos for whom the artist's situation is just not comparable.

In this respect, *Pitseolak: Pictures Out of My Life* is the perfect companion to Ray's much larger work. While it corroborates some of Ray's most disturbing observations about the reorientation of native art to white consumer taste, it presents, as a foil to her overview of the Alaskan art industry, a highly personal insider's view of the art industry of a non-urban, less completely acculturated, area. Pitseolak is a graphic artist living in Cape Dorset on Baffin Island, an island located far from Alaska in the eastern Arctic. Her numerous drawings, usually rendered in colored pencil and / or felt pen, for years have been successfully converted into marketed stone cuts and engravings by Eskimo printers of the West Baffin

Eskomo Co-operative. An old woman in 1970, when Dorothy Eber taped the interviews with her that form the text of this book, Pitseolak personally experienced the late but rapid transformation of the east Arctic Eskimo lifestyle into a parody of that of whites. She moved into Cape Dorset and settled down in a clapboard government house, for instance, only after her nomadic hunter husband prematurely left her a widow. It was at this time that the West Baffin Co-operative and its southern art market were first established, and it was for the particular purpose of disseminating Pitseolak's memories of this historic phenomenon and its effects that Eber has transcribed, in both English and syllabic Eskimo, the artist's words. The sixty-nine reproductions of Pitseolak's prints and drawings included by Eber (fourteen of which are in full color) merely guarantee communication of the full range and nuances of Pitseolak's recollections.

On one level, Pitseolak's story partakes of some of the unfortunate aspects of modern "Eskimo art" itself. Because it is autobiographical, for example, it focuses on the artist's personal and family history. Pitseolak speaks freely of the death of her husband and eleven of her seventeen children, and of the problems that her widowhood has posed. She speaks of her ensuing poverty and of her early recourse to her considerable sewing skills as a means of averting economic disaster. This atypical role of widowed mother in charge of breadwinning no doubt accounts for the preponderance of text illustrations depicting independent and active women as central characters. In prehistoric Eskimo art females are represented neither as often, nor as important and active, as men. Pitseolak's women, moreover, are dressed in clothing whose detailed stitching and decoration surely reflect the artist's own special talent. In a real sense, Eber has profiled a unique individual whose personal history tends to lift her artworks from their social context, thus allowing her decision to switch to the sale of drawings as a means of livelihood to be read as a response to personal tragedy and not to changing times. The result is augmented by her many recollections of her ethnographic past. Urged to recall what she can of her childhood and the coming of the white man, Pitseolak offers numerous firsthand accounts of now largely extinct Eskimo beliefs and practices. While these may provide some new data on a nearly lost tradition, they further help white readers to avoid confronting the less easily romanticized current situation.

At another level, however, Pitseolak's memories offset most of these effects. In the end what preoccupies the artist is not the past, but the manner of its passing. At times her comments reflect approval of the changes that the white man has brought about, but more often her reactions are at best ambivalent. Most often they lean toward obvious regret. Repeatedly she refers to the years prior to white interference as the time when her people were happy, and she several times admits a desire to go

back. Just as living in one place is confining, for example, the animals have been scared off by the motors. Pitseolak is particularly concerned for her grandchildren, whose generation is clearly in difficulty. Eber herself notes in her foreword that "when Pitseolak speaks of difficulties, they are usually the ones the new times have brought along."

Pitseolak, moreover, repeatedly identifies the culprit. Despite her occasional ambivalence and descriptive style, the old woman leaves no doubt that it is white men who have caused the changes she regrets. The Eskimos who led the first Anglican church services in Cape Dorset, for example, were replaced, according to Pitseolak, by a (presumably white) "clergyman." Unhappy with her own sedentary existence of recent years, she points out that virtually all inhabitants of Cape Dorset came to town and stayed there only because "they are working for the white man." As the Eskimos moved from a hunting culture to a cash economy, it was the white man who paid the meager wages that sustained them, in the process usually taking the best jobs for themselves.

Pitseolak's accounts of the birth and growth of the West Baffin Eskimo art industry, and of her own involvement with it, similarly express both gratitude and regret for changes introduced by a white capitalist economy. Pitseolak has no illusions about her dependence on her artistic skills for earning cash; she states many times that she "became an artist to earn money." She is, accordingly, quite grateful for the work. This dependency is particularly manifest in the elderly artist's affection for the white man who first developed a white market for her peoples' art—James Houston—and for Terence Ryan, the white man who in 1970 served as Art Director of her co-operative. While the Co-op is both owned and "controlled" by Eskimos, however, it is Ryan who gives the pens and paper to native artists and pays them for their work. That in the end it is the white consumer who "controls" the native craftsmen is implicit in Pitseolak's contention that she will keep on making drawings for the market "until *they* tell me to stop" (italics added).

Ray's concern that such white power over the native artist restricts his creativity thus is corroborated by Pitseolak. Houston, for example, encouraged the use of many colors in preference to less saleable pictures executed in only black and brown. It was Houston, too, who taught the Eskimos to flatten the undersides of their soapstone sculptures so that white buyers could set them upright on their mantles. And it was Houston who actually taught the Eskimos of Cape Dorset how to make prints. Given that the latter allowed Eskimo drawings a wide distribution, and hence increased returns, Pitseolak's judgement that her drawings "look better" in the form of prints is disquieting. The extent to which white tastes have been internalized by the Canadian Eskimos who cater to them has not been measured, but that "beauty" is at least partially perceived by

them in terms of potential profit is implied more than once by Pitseolak.

Pitseolak, moreover, several times conveys considerable professional frustration—in spite of her insistance that drawing makes her "happy." Much of this frustration clearly stems, as for the Alaskan artist, from the pressure to subordinate freedom and relevance to the white demand for "Eskimo" subject matter. Pitseolak makes no bones about the specious cultural authenticity of her own imagery when she remarks that she herself prefers earlier prints by other artists "because they were truly Eskimo." The artists of those prints, she says somewhat wistfully, grew up with shamans and spirits. Pitseolak herself has never seen either, a sobering fact in light of white fascination with traditional Eskimo myths and supernaturals. Houston, always looking for depictions of "the old ways," responded to this problem of a dying culture with the pragmatism of a true businessman. "We heard," says Pitseolak, "that Sowmik [Houston] told the people to draw anything, in any [monstrous] shape, and to put a head and a face on it; he told the people that this drawing was very good." While the results of complying with such instructions have not ceased to reap cash dividends for the artists as well as their instructors, the strain on the former is evident. "Some days," Pitseolak admits wearily, "I am really tired of the old ways—so much drawing."

Pitseolak, then, allows us a personal and native view of a process and its attendant dilemmas similar to those described in scholarly terms for Alaska by Ray. Despite their very different backgrounds, moreover, the two women concur on many points. Both feature disturbing truths about the impact of the white art market on the devastated Eskimo, and both in consequence expose as suspect the meaning of, and reasons for, his images. In the end, however, their two books can not, and must not, be equated. For, while Ray focuses on a group of now highly acculturated urban artists for whom complete assimilation into the white mainstream artworld may one day prove feasible, if not more "honest," Pitseolak represents a relatively uneducated, provicial people still greatly torn between the old ways and the new. Nowhere in her interview does Pitseolak express a desire to leave her past behind forever, and nowhere does she claim to want fully to adopt the white man's "fine art" aesthetic. Drawing is still a way of making enough to live on, and her six grandchildren must help out to make a go of it at that. While it is possible that one day these younger artists may decide to leave their past behind them and make it in the white man's world, this will never happen for Pitseolak. "My son Kumwartok," the old artist tells us in the closing sentences of her interview, "wants me to do some drawings to put around the house. But I think I will probably do some and take them to the Co-op." For Pitseolak the white artist's concept of art for personal satisfaction is still impractical and alien; for her and all others like her, Ray's solution to a nasty problem will just not work.