



Of life and landscape

Saqiyuq: stories from the lives of three Inuit women

Nancy Wachowich with Apphia Agalakti Awa,
Rhoda Kaukjak Katsak and Sandra Pikujak Katsak
McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal; 1999
304 pp \$34.95 (cloth) ISBN 0-7735-1887-8



In *Saqiyuq* Nancy Wachowich recounts the intriguing life stories of three Inuit women from successive generations on Baffin Island. In a critical half century their society has not only compressed three generations, but has moved from foot travel and dogsleds to snowmobiles and planes, from caribou and seal meat to packaged food, from igloos to prefabricated homes, from living alone on the land with their families to living in small, interrelated communities. Harsh independence and reliance on the land have given way to dependence and reliance on the south.

Saqiyuq is the Inuit word for a strong wind that suddenly changes direction. Clearly, the lives of these strong Inuit women have totally and irrevocably changed. Theirs is a simple story of survival and strength, the essence of their lives. Storytelling is an integral part of Inuit life and the means by which life skills and values are shared. Wachowich went to the North first to observe the Inuit. These women became her friends, and she later returned to record their stories on tape with the help of interpreters. Respectful of oral tradition, she has attempted to faithfully translate these women's oral histories into written narrative. If we listen closely we can learn much.

This triple biography helps us to understand that the vastness, harshness and beauty of the Arctic is the land and life the Inuit know and part of their souls. Aware of the dangers of their environment — injury, starvation, early childbirth, exposure to cold — it is the

ways of white people — the Qallunaat — that they fear. White diseases — measles, tuberculosis, substance abuse — can destroy and kill. Welcomed to the North, the Qallunaat demanded dominance and changed the Inuit's reality forever. The Qallunaat they have contact with are typically in positions of power or authority, and the Inuit cannot forget the abuses of the all-too-recent past.

Most of the book is about Apphia, born in 1931 to the Inuit way. Raised by the extended family, she had an early, arranged marriage and became a frightened mother at age 15. She delivered her 11 children as her ancestors did, in an igloo with her husband and family present. The centre of her life was caring for her children and securing the necessities of food, clothing and shelter. What is related but not defined in Apphia's account is the slow pace of her life: that of a walk, occupied by the basics of eating, sleeping, feeding the children, looking after the dogs, preparing skins and making clothes. The Inuit cover thousands of miles of northland by foot and dogsled, without map or compass, with only the land and stories to guide them. The north can support only a small number of people scattered over large areas and travelling from camp to camp. The harsh laws of

this environment gave Apphia a special joy in living and seeing other people, and a happiness in being together at church or in the community hall. She recalls how the ban on hunting and travelling on the Sabbath was strictly observed. Laws of nature must be respected or the spirits would not be with you, and white ways and religion were also accepted as strong and dangerous. Looking back on her life, Apphia considers that, as little as she had, it was sufficient; her family never felt poor until they moved into the settlement and had to use money. The last to come into the settlement, they made this change only because their children were taken into school. At age 43, she found the adjustment to settlement life

difficult. But at least she could draw on her experience and her status as an elder to instil in her grandchildren and others a love of the land and skills in survival in the North.

The adjustment to Qallunaat ways proved to be even harder for her daughter Rhoda, who at age 8 was sent to a residential school. How could she be reconciled to the

loneliness of separation from all she knew, or to schedules and clocks, a strange and different people and a new language? But from her parents, who came for her each summer, she learned respect for the land and for the old ways. She married early and became a young mother. Her approach is not to be an individualist but to identify with the group, and she questions whether it is a good thing to be immersed in Qallunaat culture.



Fred Sebastian

Issues of identity are even more pressing for Rhoda's daughter Sandra, who was not born into the traditional culture and obviously thirsts for it. She is attached to her grandparents and values their approval, and it is truly the village — her extended family — that has raised her. She gives us insight into the struggle of Inuit youth with drugs, despair and suicide. Although fearful herself, Sandra empathizes with the anguish of others. The eczema she suffers from adds to her shyness and emotional pain, until in grade 12 she is immobi-

lized by depression. Eventually she finds a traditional solution: to work through her problems by helping others. She considers becoming a doctor, but leaving the North and her family are too much to contemplate. This leaves the reader wondering by what constructive and creative means the Inuit can acquire health care workers and teachers who are of the North rather than transient nonintegrated professionals from the South.

Saqiyuq gives an intimate view of these women's lives and of their essential

ability to adapt and survive. It is important to gather such life stories before all memory of traditional lifestyles is lost. This book offers a different perspective for readers of women's biographies and of "Canadiana," one that reveals the reality of the northern life and landscape and of a people who have the courage to find a future for themselves in a challenging and ever-changing landscape.

Mary Johnston
Family physician
Revelstoke, BC

Lifeworks

X-rays and other visions

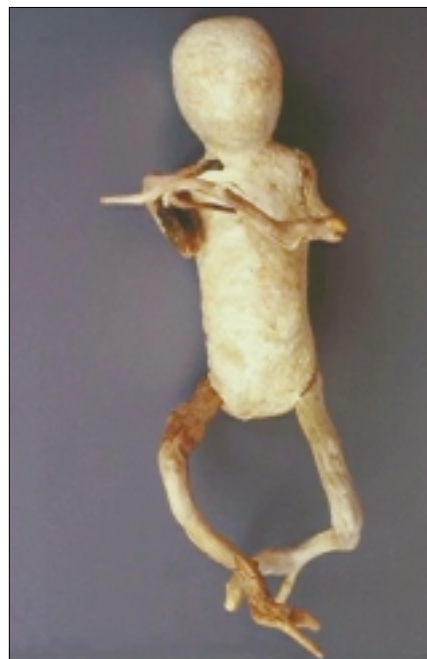
X-ray Specs is the title of an exhibition of work that originated from my examination of images used in diagnosis. The first thing that struck me about these images was how beautiful

they were. Many, using some of the most modern techniques, produced abstract blobs of pulsating colour that captured the human form in a compelling way. What struck me next was what clinicians were trying to do with these images: to peer inside living people and see what makes them tick. Is this not also what so many artists try to do? Finally, I noticed that these images are objects unto themselves: they try to measure intangible things by measuring temperature, blood flow or tissue density. This is not what you would see if you cut someone open and took a look inside.

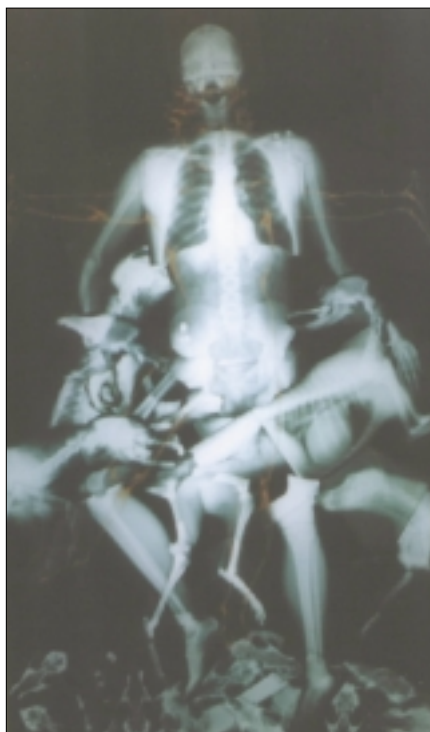
As I studied these images it became apparent to me that they were subject to a fair amount of interpretation and speculation. I thought I would use them for some speculation of my own.

The work entitled *Head Space* does this directly by presenting 56 portraits of heads or brains on 6 square panels, 9 heads on each, arranged as you would see CT scans in an operating room. They combine actual medical images with my own constructions in a playful attempt to represent what's inside our heads.

Skin, Trunk, Limb and *Sapling* are a suite of four works, each displayed on a metal-capped pedestal table. These pieces originated from discoveries I made around my property of the bits



Gerald Beaulieu, *Sapling*, 1999. Driftwood and seaweed, 86 × 30 × 25 cm.



Gerald Beaulieu, *Tinkers Damned* (detail, illuminated), 1997-1998. Drawing and x-ray collage on light box, 213 × 366 cm.

and pieces of life's presence. I have found bones, carcasses, snake skins, empty cocoons — all signs of life's passing from one stage to another. In these pieces I have tried to address the organic fragility and elegance of the body. Displaying them in a clinical style, as specimens on tables, was an attempt to contrast them with the high-tech na-