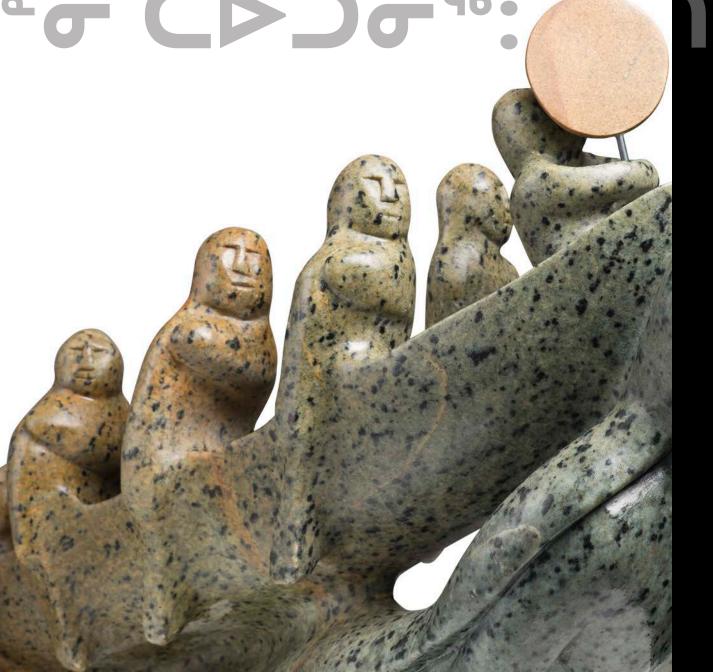
## facingNORTH art | symbol | story

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# **facingNORTH** art | symbol | story

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EXHIBITION June 14 – Dec 24, 2019

Monday-Friday | 8:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Vaughan City Hall on the SLATE Atrium Gallery

2141 Major Mackenzie Dr. Vaughan, Ontario



### facingNORTH art | symbol | story >P> CDF> σ C>Dσ<sup>5</sup>: Λ<sup>c</sup>ΛS><sup>5</sup> σ I \arthorn I > σ<sup>5</sup> bσd

#### **CURATORIAL STATEMENT**

#### Mythical. Spiritual. Allegorical. Symbolic.

No single adjective can adequately characterize Inuit art.

Art created by the Indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic regions of Greenland, Canada and Alaska depicts a visual vocabulary of an ancient symbolic language – a narrative vocabulary born of collective memory, oral storytelling and deeply rooted tradition. Paradoxically, some Inuit art may be perceived as being simultaneously simple and complex, historic and contemporary or benevolent and menacing. Undeniably though, Inuit art is an expression of a resilient people with a long, rich history of creativity dating back thousands of years while navigating through intense nomadic migrations and cultural interchanges.

Most contemporary Inuit art echoes historic precedent by depicting narrative or illustrative subject matter inspired by the powerful physical and spiritual relationships that bind Inuit society to a harsh environment. Recognizable themes are preoccupied with survival – the traditional practices of hunting and seasonal migration, the central role played by the animals of the North with whom the Inuit share the land and depend upon as a food source, the spirits of those animals and the shamans and mythologies that form links to an omnipresent spirit world.

Although some iconographic and thematic elements found in early Inuit art continue to appear in the work of many practising Inuit artists today, that is where the similarity ends. Inspiration has been recalibrated – it still taps into the traditional realm of Inuit cultural identity – but importantly now, it encourages highly individualistic styles, symbolism and subject matter.

All three Inuit artists featured in this exhibition, Abraham Ruben, Billy Merkosak and Irene Avaalaaqiaq, share strong ties to their traditional roots. Their vivid imaginations are ignited by sparks of the same inherent muse; but each artist interprets ancestral myths and cultural intersections uniquely in their work as a personal response to their cultural identity.

Abraham Anghik Ruben is an accomplished contemporary sculptor first and foremost. He deciphers myths and themes of the past through a symbolic sculptural language he formulated to transcend the spatial limitations of threedimensionality. His exquisitely animated stone compositions are filtered through a mystical inner eye, translating ancient and imprinted collective memories into modern works of art.

Billy Merkosak can see shamanistic figures and spiritual transformation journeys hiding in rough pieces of whalebone and antler, calling out to be manipulated into fantastic sculptural shapes. One can admire the pure aesthetic of his raw and forceful abstract images that exhibit a mesmerizing mix of benign and menacing expression, without even being familiar with the iconographical themes that inspired the work.

Irene Avaalaaqiaq populates her boldly engaging, highly coloured wall hangings with an original cast of myth meets reality characters, derived from both mythological elements and personal experience. Half-remembered transformation tales she recalls from her early childhood, coupled with an unrestrained imagination, masterfully morphs humans and animals into expressive abstract compositions created from only wool fabric and embroidery thread.

Present-day Inuit living in permanent settlements, in an era grappling with the impact of climate change, have a different relationship with the environment and storytelling than their nomadic ancestors. Increasingly important, the transmission of ancestral knowledge and poignant myths, narrated by the symbolic art of Ruben, Merkosak and Avaalaaqiaq, ensures the preservation of ephemeral oral tradition.

The City of Vaughan proudly recognizes the outstanding creative accomplishments of these three exceptional Inuit artists – and all Indigenous artists – not just in celebration of National Indigenous History Month during the month of June, but at all times – as respected artists, whose work contributes significantly to the wealth of the contemporary Canadian art scene.

#### **ABOUT THE ARTIST | Abraham Anghik RUBEN**



Inuvialuit sculptor, Abraham Anghik Ruben was born on Nov. 26, 1951 in the hamlet of Paulatuk, Northwest Territories at a time when diamond and mineral exploration overshadowed fur trade and commercial whaling. Inuit culture was impacted by radical change at this time, forever altering traditional ways of life – which ultimately led Ruben on his introspective artistic journey of exploring connections between his ancestral roots and his identity.

Ruben was raised with both Christian ideas and a deep reverence for Inuit beliefs and traditions. His parents reinforced that the powerful interaction between humans and nature was integral to survival and the preservation of a nomadic way of life – with oral tradition animating ancient myths and legends – igniting a creative spark in an artist on a quest to re-discover his cultural identity.

Between 1959 and 1970 Ruben and his younger brother and sister were removed from their parents and sent to live in a residential school. The trauma of separation and forced assimilation left profound emotional and cultural scars on the artist. In 1971, after leaving residential school, "a lost 19-year-old youngster looking for himself" began his formal artistic training at the University of Alaska. He focused on design, the use of tools and the integration of old and new materials, techniques and styles.

Ruben's long and distinguished career – which shows no signs of abating – has resulted in an impressive body of contemporary sculpture. His work is internationally applauded in the Canadian art scene for his signature interpretation of traditional lnuit subject matter, ancient northern cultures and artistic traditions. It is exhibited widely in numerous solo and group exhibitions and is housed in prominent public, corporate and private collections throughout the world.

#### **ARTIST STATEMENT**

As an artist, I have always been fascinated by the cultures and people of the Northern hemisphere. This interest has led me to the ancient relationship between the Inuit and the Viking Norse. There are interesting parallels between these two northern people. At the time of first contact, they had similar spiritual and religious beliefs through their respective practices of shamanism. Their spiritual, cultural and artistic traditions developed over long periods of time, tempered by their relationship to the land and the powerful spirits that inhabited these places.

The Inuit believed in the existence of the Soul in all living things. The concept of reincarnation was central to family and community beliefs. As a vigorous group of Arctic people, the Inuit came from west to east, in wave after wave of nomadic bands, in search of new land and game.

The Inuit shaman acted as mediator between the world of man, animals and the spirit world. He was the keeper of Inuit stories, myths and legends... the repository of knowledge of the land and the secret worlds. The Viking Norse came into North America by way of migrations from their Scandinavian homelands through the British Isles, Ireland and the Northern Islands, Iceland and Greenland. They had highly developed religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and artistic traditions.



The Viking Norse had a mythological landscape inhabited by gods and goddesses, giants, monsters and demons. Their sagas speak of their shamanistic beliefs. In Iceland, as in Greenland, the Viking Norse gave names to places and things that held power in their imagination. They used the spirit names of the mountain, river, stream, valley and forest – protective spirits and malevolent ones as well.

My sculpture portraying Viking Norse myths, stories and legends have Norse decorative lines and motifs. These are designs that have adapted and changed to enhance visual impact, and to convey the sense of belonging to that place and time.

Abraham **RUBEN** Into the Storm | Ragnarok End of Days Soapstone | 2014

The Ragnarok saga prophesized the total destruction of the mythical world of ancient Scandinavia inhabited by combative Norse gods, giants and monsters. Some of the gods have knowledge of the coming of the end of days, and, in preparation, they planted the seed of humanity in the forests. After Ragnarok, a young boy and girl emerge from the primeval forests to once more begin the dance of life. Another story, dealing with the tree of life and Ragnarok, has a man and woman hiding within the branches of the tree and surviving the destruction brought about by the events of Ragnarok along with powerful gods who, after becoming resurrected, return to bring life to the world.





Two shamans, one holding the sun disk, the other with drum and mallet, peform a shamanistic ritual while standing in a umiak (open skin boat). Beneath the umiak, Sednas ride the waves. The traditional role of the shaman was to act as the mediator between Sedna, goddess of sea creatures, and his people.

At times of calamity and duress, the shaman would be asked to intervene on behalf of the people to set things right. His purpose was to re-establish balance in the lives of the Inuit in his camp.

Sedna was generally thought to be a benevolent spirit, tasked with providing food from the sea to those who would pay due respect and reverence for the life taken. The Sedna story differs greatly from region to region across the vast arctic world of the Inuit. In some stories, she is the old grandmother, in others a mature powerful woman with a husband and children or a beautiful maiden. Abraham **RUBEN Beckoning the Skies** Soapstone | 2010



#### Abraham **RUBEN Nanuk** Soapstone | 2019

The polar bear or Nanuk – the most feared and respected of all land and sea animals – has played an important role in the cultural and material life of the Inuit. The Inuit have many legends that show their deep respect for the polar bear.

The shaman may take on the spirit of the bear and believe that their spirits were interchangeable. The bear is a representation of the shaman, whose face we see in the hollow of the bear's body. He is a symbol of the shaman's power and his form when he enters the spirit world. The portal is represented by the icebergs surrounding the shaman's face – which open and close – and allow the shaman to move between worlds.



#### Abraham **RUBEN** Into Greenland Waters Soapstone | 2019

This sculpture represents the Inuit who left their homelands and origins in Alaska, and travelled East to Baffin Island, and then on to Greenland. In this new territory, the Inuit came into contact with the Viking Norse. Over time and after initial contact, the Inuit and the Vikings came to some accommodation and engaged in trade and communal hunting that benefited both. Eventually the Inuit realized they were better adapted to Arctic life than the Vikings, mainly because of their elaborate hunting technology learned hundreds of years before from their ancestors in Alaska.



Abraham **RUBEN Dragon Ship** Soapstone and Metal | 2013

The Viking battle ship, its sail emblazoned with dragon motif made ready for conquest. The sides of the ship are decorated with images of Odin in his many guises. Odin, the ruler of the Norse gods, was a wanderer and had shamanistic gualities.

#### Abraham Anghik RUBEN

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2017	The Guild, Abraham Anghik Ruben- Similar in Spirit: Norse and Inuit Interactions,
	Montreal, QC
2015-2016	Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Aurora Borealis, illustrated catalogue,
	Yellowknife, NWT
2014-2015	Museum Cerny Inuit Collection, Moving Forward, Breaking Through, illustrated
	catalogue, Bern, Switzerland
2014	Rockwell Museum, The World of Man Animals and Spirits, illustrated catalogue,
	Corning, New York
2012-2013	Smithsonian, National Museum of the American Indian, Arctic Journeys/Ancient
	Memories, The Sculpture of Abraham Anghik Ruben, illustrated catalogue, Washington D.C.

#### **GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

2015-2016 Linked, Musée Océanographique, Monaco
2013 100 Masters: Only in Canada, Winnipeg Art Gallery, illustrated catalogue
2011 Inuit Modern, Art Gallery of Ontario
2007 Inuit Sculpture Now , National Gallery, Touring Exhibition
1999 Northern Rock: Contemporary Inuit Stone Sculpture, illustrated catalogue, McMichael Canadian Art Collection

#### PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC
- Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
- National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
- Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario
- Government of Canada, Centre Block Parliament Building, Ottawa , Ontario
- Canadian Museum of History (Civilization), Ottawa, Ontario
- De Young Museum- Fowler Collection, San Francisco, California
- McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario
- Musée des Beaux Arts, Montreal, Quebec
- Rockwell Museum, Corning, New York

#### **CORPORATE COLLECTIONS**

- Mackenzie Financial Corporation, Toronto, Ontario
- Labatt's Ltd., Ontario
- Imperial Oil Ltd., Calgary, Alberta
- BMW Canada, Ontario
- Citicorp, Toronto, Ontario
- GE Canada Inuit Collection, Mississauga, Ontario
- Sprott Asset Management, Toronto, Ontario
- Alberta Stock Exchange, Calgary, Alberta
- Elite Construction, Concord, Ontario
- Venture Metals, Etobicoke, Ontario

#### HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2016 Order of Canada

#### **ABOUT THE ARTIST | Billy MERKOSAK**

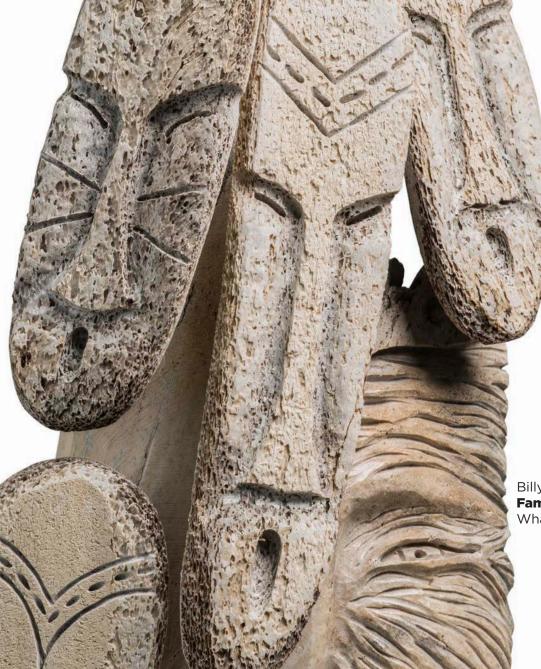


Born in 1966, Billy Merkosak makes his home in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, on Baffin Island. His artistic inspiration stems from local archeological artifacts and revered stories of the past shared by elders recounting traditional ways of Inuit life. "I try to draw on my own experiences and the real experiences behind those stories, and adapt those stories with our modern way of life."

As a Nunavut artist, Merkosak is primarily known for his wide range of whalebone sculptures – including transformations – occasionally producing works in stone, granite, ivory, graphic illustrations and water color paintings. He is also recognized as a traditional mask maker in whalebone and wood.

His wide range of interests include mentoring younger generations of Inuit artists and working as Project Officer for Public Works and as Arts and Traditional Economy Advisor for Economic Development and Transportation for the Nunavut Government. "I really like what I am doing in the field of art work, travel, culture and pursuing the traditional Inuit lifestyle. It gives me great pride to connect the past and present together with modern Inuit art."

Billy Merkosak's work is exhibited in prominent public institutions, including the National Gallery of Canada. It is housed in a number of public, corporate and private collections and enjoyed by many visitors to Canada's North, particularly in the community of Pond Inlet in the Territory of Nunavut.



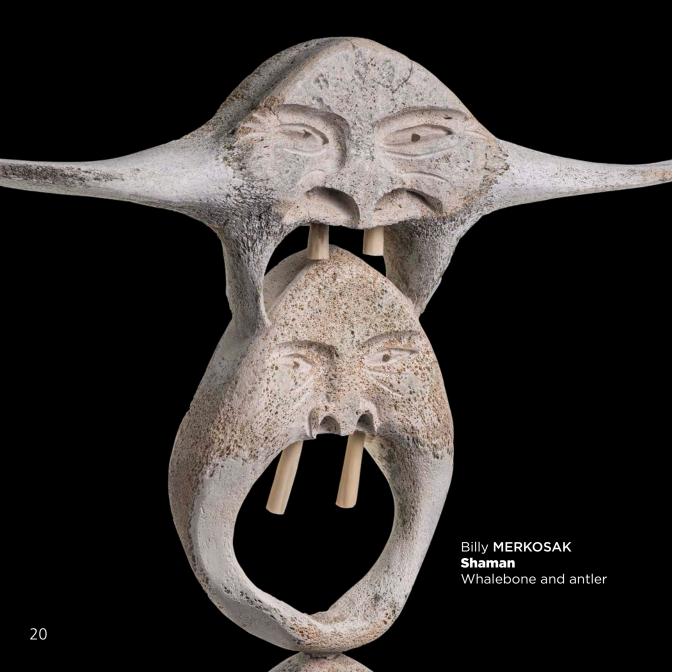
Billy **MERKOSAK Family** Whalebone



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Billy **MERKOSAK Shaman Spirits** Whalebone and antler

(Personal States)





#### **ABOUT THE ARTIST | Irene AVAALAAQIAQ**



Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq (born in 1941) is one of Canada's most respected Inuit artists. Her work is deeply rooted in her lived experience, often relating to being orphaned as a young child and the Inuit stories her grandmother told her. Avaalaaqiaq is recognized for her drawings, prints and wall hangings.

The artist was born on the north shore of Tebesjuak Lake near Baker Lake, Nunavut. Her mother died shortly after she was born, and with her father unable to care for her, she was raised on the land by her grandparents in a traditional Inuit lifestyle until their deaths. Avaalaaqiaq's early upbringing was steeped in myths and legends, ultimately influencing her creative body of work.

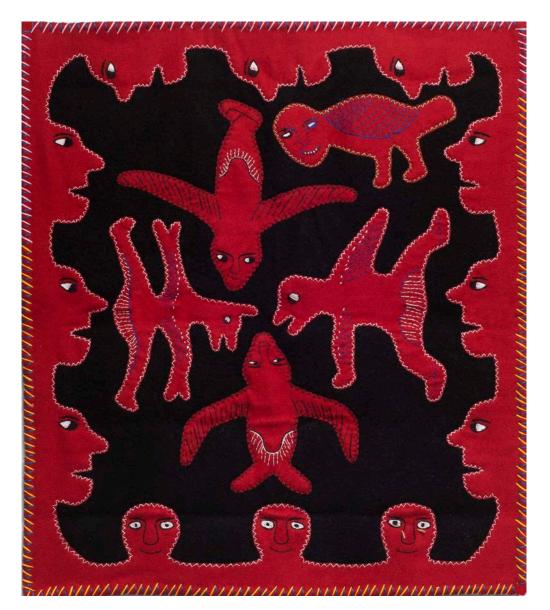
The artist's career evolved from drawing to sculpting to printmaking and led to her final preference – designing wall hangings in the now famous tradition of many prominent female artists from Baker Lake. The lasting impression Avaalaaqiaq's grandparents left on the young child's imagination led to her signature artistic interpretations of shamanistic transformation in which myth and reality intersect and animals often appear with human heads.

In 1999, the University of Guelph awarded Avaalaaqiaq an honorary Doctor of Laws in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the development of Inuit art and her leadership role in the Nunavut community of Baker Lake. Her work is housed in many public art collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre and the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

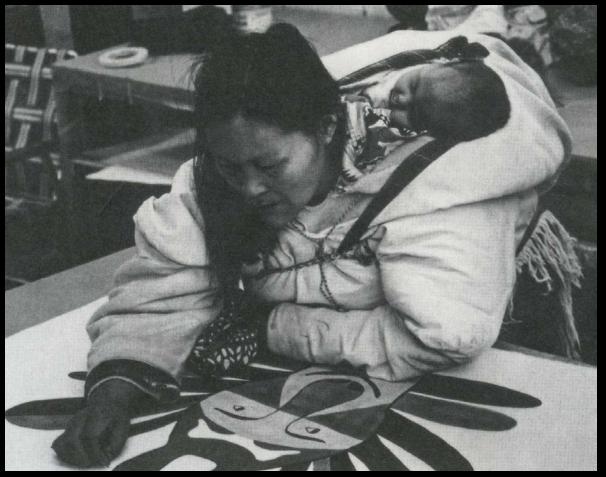


Irene **AVAALAAQIAQ** Wool duffle and felt, and cotton embroidery thread





Irene **AVAALAAQIAQ** Wool duffle and felt, and cotton embroidery thread



Whenever I see my wall hangings, they remind me of my life. Also, I always remember my grandmother and the stories and legends she told me. When I grew up, there were no other people except my grandparents. I had never seen white people. When I do sewing and make a wall hanging, I do what I remember. I can see it clear as a picture. When I am looking at it, it looks like it is actually happening in those days, as it was in my life.

Irene Avaalaaqiaq, 1999 Irene Avaalaaqiaq: Myth and Reality, by Judith Nasby, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002



Irene **AVAALAAQIAQ** Wool duffle and felt, and cotton embroidery thread

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#### CREDITS

The City of Vaughan is extremely grateful to both the Kipling Gallery and the Canadian Arctic Producers for their invaluable exhibition support and generous spirit of collaboration in realizing facingNORTH: art | symbol | story.

Located in Vaughan, the Kipling Gallery, dedicated to advancing art appreciation and connoisseurship has established a highly respected reputation in the commercial art world, proudly representing prominent Indigenous and contemporary artists worldwide and acting as the exclusive agent for the internationally acclaimed Inuit sculptor, Abraham Anghik Ruben. Visit kiplinggallery.com to learn more about all the artists featured in this exhibition.

The Kipling Gallery represents Billy Merkosak and Irene Avaalaagiag through a commercial partnership with the Canadian Arctic Producers, the Inuit owned marketing arm of Arctic Co-operatives Limited. Arctic Co-Operatives is a service organization owned and controlled by the 32 community-based, multi-purpose co-operatives in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon. They are dedicated to providing services and business development opportunities to communities throughout Canada's north with Inuit and Dene artists to promote the finest selection of their art and distinctive culture around the world.

All art featured in the City of Vaughan curated exhibition, facingNORTH: art | symbol | story is on loan from the Kipling Gallery.

#### **PHOTO CREDITS**

Front Cover, Inside Front Cover, Page 13 | Abraham Ruben, Into Greenland Waters | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Back Cover and Page 19 | Billy Merkosak, Shaman Spirits | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 2 | Billy Merkosak, **Transformation** | Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 6| Photograph (Abraham Ruben with mask): Courtesy of Nathalie Heiberg-Harrison

Page 7 | Photograph (Abraham Ruben with sculpture): Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery Pages 8-9 | Abraham Ruben, Into the Storm | Ragnarok End of Days | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Pages 10-11 | Abraham Ruben, Beckoning the Skies | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of **Kipling Gallery** 

Page 12 | Abraham Ruben, Nanuk | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery Page 14 | Abraham Ruben, Dragon Ship | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery Page 16 | Photograph: Courtesy of Billy Merkosak

Page 17 | Billy Merkosak, Family | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 18 | Billy Merkosak, Drummer | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 20 | Billy Merkosak, Shaman | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 21 | Billy Merkosak, Face | Photograph: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery

Page 22 | Photograph, Courtesy of Inuit Art Foundation

Pages 23, 24, 25, 27 | Irene Avaalaaqiaq | Photographs: Daniel Dabrowski, Courtesy of Kipling Gallery Page 26 | Photograph: Len Anthony



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