Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq
was born at Princess Mary Lake close to Baker Lake, Nunavut, Canada. It was in 1958 that she moved to Baker Lake where she gave birth to one of her children. Her husband David Tiktaalaq and her brother William Ukpatiku are both carvers and printmakers. In this exhibition, we are displaying three works of Irene Avaalaaqiaq’s titled, *Spirit Transformations.*

“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.” (Avaalaaqiaq in Nasby 2002a:3).

**BACKGROUND:** “I was born at Uluttuaq past Qigaugattuaq. My mother, Gualittuaq, died in the spring shortly after I was born and my grandmother saved me. She poured a little bit of milk from a caribou breast into my mouth when I was a newborn because she couldn’t breastfeed me. Later, my grandmother fed me caribou broth by taking it from her mouth and putting it to mine” (Avaalaaqiaq in Nasby 2002a:5). She now lives in Baker Lake.
THE BEGINNINGS OF MAKING ART: “Around 1969 and 1970, I started carving out of soapstone. I was making miniature size carvings. One time I carved a ptarmigan with a human head on it. I took my carving to the area administrator and was so thrilled to receive money. I bought lots of groceries” (Aavallaaqiaq in *ibid.*, 30). Around the same time, Aavallaaqiaq began making wall hangings at the request of Jack and Shelia Butler.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES THAT WERE INFLUENTIAL: Loss of her grandmother and the experience of growing up as an orphan

MEDIA: Drawing; printmaking; sculpture; and wall hangings.

PROCESS: “If I started working on a wall hanging in the morning, I will work all day and all evening until my eyes are tired and start again first thing the next morning, and continue in this manner until it is completed. If I leave the wall hanging for too long, I get lazy” (Aavallaaqiaq in *Nasby ibid.*, 56).


TELLING VISUAL STORIES: A constant in Aavallaaqiaq’s work is a transformative vision. It is important to understand that in the case of Inuit myths, folklore and material culture there are an abundant number of references to people who turn into animals. Margaret Lantis (1926-2008)*, the famed anthropologist, produced ethnographic studies focused on the Nunivak culture, as well as a study on the 1964 “Great Alaska Earthquake,” at one point remarked that human-animal transformation in Inuit mythology had an “immediacy and reality” that was unknown in other parts of the world. Does contemporary ethnography provide enough evidence that this transformative vision is still meaningful in Inuit life? In the case of Aavallaaqiaq she continues to convey these ideas in her work and by doing so maintains a link to her heritage.

Realizing that Inuit mythology is a complex set of images, beliefs and images that have been passed down by the Inuit people for several generations there are four basic themes that bridge ancient cultural concepts and current belief systems: animism, the significance of animals, that multiple deities exist and the belief that mythological creatures are present. The idea of animism is present in Aavallaaqiaq’s work and in her visual
stories she is definitely the keeper of the record. Animism is important because it suggest that non-human life forms have a soul or spirit that is equivalent to humans.

Avaalaaqiaq’s wall hanging *Helping Spirits* (1997) is an excellent example of how animism and transformation play an important role in her work. Mary Bouchard’s interviews with Avaalaaqiaq help us understand the symbolism and meaning of this vision:

In traditional times, animal and human spirits were considered equal. Animals could transform themselves into humans and humans could transform themselves into animals. Some animal spirits were considered to be helping spirits. If humans were frightened or confused, they could call on an animal’s spirit for protection and guidance. By thinking about the animal, the human could assume that creature’s strength, or speed, or other abilities.

This wall hanging depicts this ancient belief. The two figures at the top represent the central figure’s thoughts. Constantly worried about offending the lingering spirits of deceased animals and humans – depicted on the outside border – the central figure is saying:

“If I am afraid, I can turn into a wolf and quickly run away. If the wolf’s speed is not sufficient, I can turn into a bird and fly far away.”

The gold coloured inner border shows how animals and humans were interdependent and how the animal spirits protected the humans.” (quoted in Nasby 75-76 derived from an interview by Mary Bouchard)

What is apparent from this boldly colored wall hanging is what appears to be static is in the mind’s eye kinetic and dynamic as these forms manifest themselves. This work and others like it may appear to be a decorative statement which is part of the experience of her work as well as other artists who convey similar ideas, but in the end we are in a storyteller’s world of myth and animism which begins to breathe and live in the present.

Avaalaaqiaq’s bold and colorful drawings, prints and wall hangings, as well as her sculpture, focus on her experiences growing up as an orphan and Inuit stories told to her by her grandmother. She has also sculpted many small
stone carvings of human-headed birds. “The stories my grandmother told me are from the time when animals used to talk like human beings... They stopped talking not very long ago” (Avaalaaqiaq in Nasby, 56).

Curator Judith Nasby wrote: "Early wall hangings often depicted rows of single figures framed by a border. After 1980, the imagery was focused in the center and depicted with large, colourful shapes. The fully developed borders added to the narrative content" (Nasby, 57).
In this instance, Irene and her husband make their way home through the dusk, large black boulders surrounding them turn into menacing human heads. The man prepares to escape by changing his head into a goose’s, while his wife transforms into a ptarmigan (head), wolf (arm) and fish (body). Ravens with human heads fly down to help. Avaalaaqiaq often portrays birds, who represent freedom and escape, as helping spirits.

Avaalaaqiaq’s textiles display her distinct aesthetic style, tying together visual elements of characteristically personified borders and centrally placed figures, with the negative space of a contrasting background. Although Avaalaaqiaq uses an appliqué technique of stitching one piece of cloth over another, her unified textile compositions appear to fit together like a puzzle. This visual aesthetic references earlier textile traditions of making clothing, where pieces of contrasting skin were sewn together to form intricate designs.

Avaalaaqiaq's work is also distinguished by her unique subject matter. Her characteristic border motif incorporates emerging faces, both animal and human, which surround the
central anamorphic figures; her figures always appear in a transformative state, neither fully human nor animal. The textile, *Spirit Figures*, features a central fish-like figure, surrounded by fish people, bringing to mind the legend of *Sedna*. Although known by different names by various Inuit groups, the legend of *Sedna* is predominant throughout the Canadian Arctic. There are many versions of this legend; however, a common element is her banishment from the Inuit world to the world

**The Legend Of Sedna (Sedna is the Inuit Sea Goddess and Queen of the Underworld. She's a sinister hag with one eye, no fingers and a giant bloated body. She is sometimes depicted as a walrus.)**

**One variation of the myth**

Sedna is a major figure in Inuit mythology and several different versions of this myth exist.

As the legend goes, Sedna was a beautiful Inuit girl who lived with her father. She was very vain and thought she was too beautiful to marry just anyone. Time and time again she turned down hunters who came to her camp wishing to marry her. Finally one day her father said to her, "Sedna, we have no food and we will go hungry soon. You need a husband to take care of you, so the next hunter who comes to ask your hand in marriage, you must marry him." She ignored her father and kept brushing her hair as she looked at her reflection in the water.

Soon her father saw another hunter approaching their camp. The man was dressed elegantly in furs and appeared to be well-to-do even though his face was hidden. Sedna's father spoke to the man. "If you wish to seek a wife I have a beautiful daughter. She can cook and sew and I know she will make a good wife." Under great protest, she was placed aboard of the hunters kayak and journeyed to her new home. Soon they arrived at an island. She looked around and could see nothing. No sod hut, no tent, just bare rocks and a cliff. The hunter stood before her and as he pulled down his hood, he let out and evil laugh. Her husband was not a man as she had thought but a raven in disguise. She screamed and tried to run, but the bird dragged her to a clearing on the cliff. Her new home was a few tufts of animal hair and feathers strewn about on the hard, cold rock. The only food she had to eat was fish. Her husband, the raven, brought raw fish to her after a day of flying off in search of food.

Sedna was very unhappy and miserable. She cried and cried and called her father's name. Through the howling arctic winds her father could hear his daughter's cries. He felt guilty for what he had done as he knew she was sad. He decided it was time to rescue his daughter. He loaded up his kayak and paddled for days through the frigid arctic waters to Sedna's home. When he arrived she was standing on the shore. She hugged her father then quickly climbed into his kayak and paddled away. After many hours of travel, Sedna turned and saw a black speck far off into the distance. She felt the fear well up inside of her for she knew the speck was her angry husband flying in search of her.
The big black raven swooped down upon the kayak bobbing on the ocean. Sedna's father took his paddle and struck at the raven but missed as the bird continued to harass them. Finally the raven swooped down near the kayak and flapped his wing upon the ocean. A vicious storm began to brew. The calm Arctic Ocean soon became a raging torrent tossing the tiny kayak about. Sedna's father became very frightened. He grabbed Sedna and threw her over the side of the kayak into the ocean. "Here, he screamed, here is your precious wife, please do not hurt me, take her."

She screamed and struggled as her body began go numb in the icy Arctic waters. She swam to the kayak and reached up, her fingers grasping the side of the boat. Her father, terrified by the raging storm, thought only of himself as he grabbed the paddle and began to pound against her fingers. Sedna screamed for her father to stop but he kept beating her. Her frozen fingers cracked and fell into the ocean. Affected by her evil husband’s powers, Sedna's fingers while sinking to the bottom, turned into seals. Sedna attempted again to swim and cling to her father's kayak. Again he grabbed the paddle and began beating at her hands. Again Sedna's hands, frozen by the arctic sea again cracked off. The stumps began to drift to the bottom of the sea, this time they turned into the whales and other large mammals. Vanquished, she didn’t fight any more and began to sink into the ocean.

Sedna, tormented and raging with anger for what had happened to her, did not perish. She became, and still is today, the goddess of the sea. Sedna's companions are the seals, and the whales that sit with her at the bottom on the ocean. Her anger and fury against man is what drums up the violent seas and storms. Hunters have a great respect for her. Legend has it that they must treat her with respect. Shamans from the world above must swim down to her to comb her long black tangled hair. This calms her down. Once this is done, she releases her mammals to allow the Inuit to eat from the bounty of the sea. It is for this reason in the north that after a hunter catches a seal he drops water into the mouth of the mammal, a gesture to thank Sedna for her kindness in allowing him to feed his family.

Another variation of the myth

She made a vow to remain single in order to look after her elderly and poor father. All of the marriage proposals that came her way were rejected.

Then one day a mysterious but utterly charming fellow turned up in his kayak. He was a handsome foreigner, intelligent, exotic, alluring and very wealthy. Sedna was offered blubber in abundance. Luxuriant furs to sleep on. All the fish oil she could possibly make use of. This was too much for a young girl to cope with and she allowed herself to be lured into his kayak.

The marriage was not a happy one. Although he adored her, she soon came to find him repellent. "You're not the man I married," she often said. With some justification as it turned out he was really a spooky bird-spirit.
Meanwhile her father was tearing his furs in anguish. Deciding to pay a visit to his lost daughter, he sailed to the Land of Birds and found her in a state of distress. That evening, her husband returned home from work and found her gone. In a screaming rage, the bird spirit climbed into his kayak and paddled in pursuit at full speed. (He did an awful lot of paddling for a bird spirit.)

As he approached, she tried to hide under some furs, but her husband became so angry that the skies turned black and the ocean began to seethe. That was enough to terrify anyone, and her father, fearing the very world was coming to an end, chucked her overboard.

She clutched at the side of the kayak, but her grim father chopped her fingers off and down she went. At once the skies cleared, the bird spirit flapped off and peace descended. Her fingers wriggled onto an ice floe and became the first sea creatures, and she floated to the very bottom of the sea and stayed there.

Since that time she was viewed by the Inuit as ruling all Arctic sea life and in that capacity she decides the fate of all ocean creatures—and the people who hunt them. It is said that if you go into a shamanic trance, you can descend to the bottom of the sea and comb her dark tresses. As a result, she might send you a seal or a walrus for dinner.

As the Queen of the Dead rules over the Adlivun Underworld from her eternally unreachable ice palace, she has also given her name to the so-called tenth planet, a remote object lurking in the nether regions of the solar system. This underworld that extends far beyond Pluto is small, remote and extremely cold.

**ADLIVUN (this is a frozen underworld that Sedna reigns over)**

The spirits living here are also called the Adlivun. After you die, you descend into this realm for purposes of purification, punishment or preservation.

To journey to this underworld you have to suffer many trials and tribulations boiling stews of seal meat and treacherous ice floes. This underworld is not the final destination of the dead. It is more like purgatory or limbo a waystation of sorts. If you are successful you will be cleansed and purified to take the final journey to the paradise of the moon.

**MAJOR COMMISSION:** The most significant commission Avaalaaqiaq received was in 1975. She made a wall hanging, untitled, measuring 310 cm x 150 cm, for the Town Centre Complex in Churchill, Manitoba. In 1999, she received an honorary degree from the University of Guelph in Ontario.

**STYLE:** Nasby wrote, "Avaalaaqiaq uses a distinctive zigzag backstitch or detached chain stitches, often to create rays of sunlight, or willow twigs—the latter is particularly significant since her name, Avaalaaqiaq, means “willow” in Inuktitut" (Nasby, 39).
Exhibition Catalogues


*Abbreviated Lantis Bibliography*