Many of the perspective on the work of Kenojuak Ashevak recognize her prints for their difference from the work of her peers. The question must be asked, though, why is her work held in such high esteem? Why do art critics, accustomed to looking at the work of contemporary artists influenced by European models, praise this artist above other artists from the Cape Dorset West Baffin Studio Collective? By looking at a lithographic print, *Gulls and Ravens*, 2001, that differs from her iconic, single-motif style, we can better understand what attracts modern viewers to Kenojuak’s work. Unlike the drawings and prints designed by other members of her collective, Kenojuak’s work has moved away from describing personal narratives or conveying events, towards transpersonal imagery that is composed using only the rules of aesthetics. Her
prints can be appreciated without an understanding of her background or history; they can be seen simply as the beautiful images they are, which is her sole intention.

Kenojuak Ashevak, or simply Kenojuak, as, according to Deborah Everett and Elayne Zorn, “the Inuit did not use surnames till 1970,”1 was born at Ikirashaq in 19272. She was raised in the traditional ways of the Inuit, which included travel by canoe and dog sled, hunting, and fishing.3 Before the graphic arts were introduced to the Cape Dorset community in the 1950’s by James Houston, a trusted government worker, Kenojuak had already given birth to three children, been diagnosed with tuberculosis, had to adopt to another family her youngest child to receive treatment for tuberculosis, and then had to suffer in a hospital in Quebec the knowledge that all three of her offspring had died while she was gone.4 Dorothy Farr explains best the situation the Inuit found themselves in at this time;

“A decline in the fur trade in the 1950’s, along with a scarcity of caribou and consequent famine and disease, particularly tuberculosis, drove most Inuit to live in settlements on government assistance. Infant mortality rates were very high. The ill were sent to sanitoria in the south, sometimes for years. Some died before being reunited with their families.”5

Through these hardships, the arts program developed by James Houston “provided a means for Inuit to gain financial security.”6

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3 Leroux, 96.
5 Dorothy Farr. "Amauti; Exploiting the Presence of Inuit Women as Subject and as Artist." (Inuit Art Quarterly 12, no. 3, 2002), 46-47.
Her experiences, though, do not influence her work directly. As Ansgar Walk explains: “Narrative elements, or even the retelling of things she herself has experienced, are absent on the whole in Kenojuak’s work. Objects do not interact but are, rather, part of a scene depicted in its entirety. One also looks in vain for self-portraits and drawings of her family.” 7 This is where an analysis of her work begins. The elements of her life that enter her work are simply there because those are the elements she has at her disposal, they are the tools her life experiences have provided for her. In *Gulls and Ravens*, a lithograph from 2001 (fig. 1), nearly five decades removed from the beginning of her career, Kenojuak has created a print based not on her drawings, but “from layering the cut-out shaped of two of her bird subjects.” 8

This print relies on the interaction of transparent gradients of first cool blues then warm reds and yellows in which the bird forms begin as shapes created in the negative space, in the areas of each layer not created with color. This openness allows for the warm and cool transparencies to interact, creating a rainbow pallet that shimmers through the nearly abstracted curvilinear forms. These forms, with brief examination, can be identified as shifted and rotated arrangements of first a group of ravens, dark and nearly overwhelming, laid over similarly arranged gulls, as the title suggests. The eyes of the ravens at the top allow the colors from the partially hidden layers to blaze through. As the viewer travels to the bottom of the piece, the transparencies of at least three layers, including the once-black ravens, now allow the bird shapes underneath to fall into a flowing abstraction.

Though these bird shapes lack the characteristic additional plumage on a single motif that Kenojuak is known for, *Gulls and Ravens* is as strong of an example as there is of Kenojuak’s eye for both color arrangement and formal composition. The simplification of the bird forms lend them to be used in a way that is in keeping with her tendency towards “allover networks of linked creatures, with surprisingly organic interconnections.”9 This attention, to the way the elements relate in a composition, is in keeping with the European schools of art that have, for centuries, emphasized the importance of organization within a strong piece of art. Examples of these organizational tools are the rule of thirds, the concept of lines of sight, and of the use of movement within a rectangular frame. Western critics and even laypeople can appreciate Kenojuak’s prints following the same models, whether known consciously or subconsciously, as to appreciate the work of any other contemporary artist.

Because Kenojuak’s intention is to create without “giv[ing] any weight to the idea of its being an image of something...I am just concentrating on placing it down on paper in a way that is pleasing to my own eye,”10 the image that we see is what she intends us to see. Her work lacks the intellectual weight of the work of her peers who show the “colors, clothes, relationships with children, chores that demand daily attention, hardships that must be endured, customs that must be passed on, beauty that underlies even the bleakest landscape.”11 Because of this difference, Kenojuak’s “immense talent, her spontaneity and her aesthetic sense have contributed enormously to wealth and diversity of Cape Dorset art.”12 In her we do not see an artist “torn

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9 Everett, 5.
11 Leroux, 18.
12 Leroux, 24.
between the traditional and the modern,” as Odette Leroux and her colleagues generalize the group of women artists from Cape Dorset. Instead we see an artist that has embraced this new experience of mass communication and world travel along with the culture and beauty of her homeland. This fusion was best understood through her mannerisms as described by Ansgar Walk when discussing Kenojuak’s appearance at an exhibition of her work in Germany entitled *Kenojuak-Works of an Inuit Artist fro the Collection of Ansgar and Ulrike Walk:*

> “Since 1966 she has called home an arctic settlement of no more than 1,300 people home. And yet, remarkably, she is quite at home in front of large crowds... An indescribable gleam radiates from her eyes, signaling that she has recognized you... Her self-confident cordiality and sense of humour is enchanting... In conversation, she reveals layers of herself that give us only an intimation of the eruptive forces that linger constrained and hidden from view.”

As “Gulls and Ravens” is a work conceived later in the artist’s career, Kenojuak’s focus when making new art has begun to change. In the past, her work was created using an ever-growing pantheon of forms and elements. As she ages, she does not produce as many drawings or prints, and thus her methodology has altered, “concentrat[ing] on variants of the same subjects and perpetually new ways of seeing them.”

> “Gulls and Ravens” exemplifies this, as the way the print was constructed involved taking two basic bird forms, the gull and the raven, altering them into a few variations, then repeating and overlapping the forms with transparency. The power of the image is not lessened by the experimentation that occurs within this composition, however. Even though the number of individual figures in her piece has increased, they still fit the description Everette and Zorn apply to her work:

> “Perhaps the most important and individualistic feature of Kenojuak’s prints is the vibrance and intensity of the life forms portrayed. They are assertive and self-assured. They stare out at the viewer with a wide-eyed and inquisitive gaze. They

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13 Walk, 20-23.
14 Walk, 20-23.
do not decorate the page— they take control of it, energizing every inch. Even when her images evolve complex and interwoven groupings, they never result in confusion. Each element remains vital because of the balance and clarity of her arrangements.”¹⁵

It is for this reason that she has attained the attention she has over the other members of her collective. It is because of the ability of her prints to convey quickly and directly that the Government of Canada chose to use previous work in both stamps and coinage, as well as commissioned work to signify both the signing of the Inuit land claim treaty between the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut and the Government of Canada in 1990 and the ceremonial signing in of the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut Settlement Agreement in Iqaluit in 1992.¹⁶ If her work was not nearly as focused on just appearance, if it were to attempt to tell a story that would not be instantly understandable to viewer, or if it were not so iconic, her work would not have been appreciated by the public and by the world to the extent that it is. It is the simplicity and consideration to simply the appearance that allows her pieces to be so accessible to even those unfamiliar with Inuit life. If “Gulls and Ravens” were not arranged as carefully as it was, the visual rhythm and pattern that is the result would not hold the near-abstraction together. It is because of the concern and attention to appearance that her work is prized.

Since the first drawing she handed to James Houston, Kenojuak put this care and attention into her work.

“When I first started to make a few lines on paper, my love, Johnniebo, smiles at me and said, Inumn, which means ‘I love you.’ I just knew inside his heart that he almost cried knowing that I was trying my best to say something on a piece of paper that would bring food to the family.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Everette, 5.
¹⁶ Walk, 20-23.
This was more than just an economic opportunity for Kenojuak. This was a way of changing the lives of her entire community. The collective worked together to produce prints, the profits of which would sustain not only the artist that drew the original design, but also the artist that carved the stonecuts and the printers that worked with the ink and paper. It was important for these pieces to be sold, to have people interested in them at all. “I continue to do so [to draw] primarily for the future these works of art will guarantee for my children,” she said [in her oral autobiography]. “Therefore, I am grateful to those people who are interested in, and admire, my work.”18 Art is Kenojuak’s livelihood, her only want to put good food on the table, instead of the rotten walrus meat that killed her two eldest children while she was away and unable to care for them.19

In the nearly sixty years since she began working with the tools provided by European art to produce artwork for people she would never see, she has “maintain[ed] the balance of form, attention to detail and the brilliant colourist’s eye that catapulted her work into the international spotlight.”20 It is this value that she has placed on her art, begun for the benefit of her family, that has given her work the attention she has needed for it to be her sole form of income. It has allowed her to travel the world, to places she never would have been able to visit, to see her work displayed for thousands to see as well as to create new work for the country that claimed the land of her birth. She has been held up as a person for Canada to be proud to call their own, receiving an election to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1974, nomination for the Companion to the Order of Canada in 1982, and the Governor General’s Award for the Visual and Media Arts

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18 Blodgett, 24.
19 Blodgett, 18.
in 2008.\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{22} The work Kenojuak Ashevak has the ability to convey a singular message in a universal manner in a way that has attracted viewers to her work since the first print that was made from one of her drawings in 1958.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Walk, 20-23.
\textsuperscript{22} Speak, \textit{Focus}, 11.
\textsuperscript{23} ____. "Kenojuak Ashevak." (\textit{Annual Report, National Gallery of Canada 2000}), 24.
Figure 1:
“Gulls and Ravens”
Kenojuak Ashevak
Medium: Lithograph
Size: 57 x 76.6 cm
Purchased 2002
National Gallery of Canada (no. 41075) 
Edition: 50
Collection: Collection of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-Operative Ltd.
Printed by: Pitseolak Niviaqsi (1947- )

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24 National Gallery of Canada.
Bibliography


