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The Photography Practice of Contemporary Inuk Art Photographer Barry Pottle

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Article abstract

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CONVERSATION

Evolving Knowledge: The Photography Practice of Contemporary Inuk Art Photographer Barry Pottle

Barry Pottle

Independent Inuk Photographer

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Interview with Inuk artist Barry Pottle from Nunatsiavut in Labrador (Rigolet). Photographs are selected from ten years of photography based on his experiences and observations as an urban Inuk. This conversation provides insight into Pottle's photographic practice, particularly the artist's process of learning the art and technical processes of photography and why his photographs matter in the process of Canadians facing their complicities in Canada's ongoing colonialism. Pottle's practice produces unique knowledge about Inuit culture and history through his eyes as an urban Inuk photographer.

Keywords: Inuit photography; urban Inuit; Labrador

Introduction

Barry Pottle is an Inuk artist originally from Nunatsiavut in Labrador (Rigolet). He presently lives in Ottawa, Ontario, where he works with the federal government. Over the last fifteen years, he has become known for a unique and original body of photography based on his experiences and observations as an urban Inuk. Barry's recent exhibitions include *ᐃᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ ᑕᑕᑕᑦᑕᑦ ᐃᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ / Among All These Tundras* (2019, 2018); *Future Possible: Art of Newfoundland and Labrador from 1949 to Present* (2019); *No Borders Art Festival* (2019); *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (2019); *Kaleidoscope: 2018 Additions to the City of Ottawa Art Collection* (2018–19); *Flash Photography Festival* (2018); *Gathering Place* (2018); *Barry Pottle: Urban Inuit Photography* (2018); *Ādisòkàmagan / Nous connaître un peu nous-mêmes / We'll All Become Stories* (2018); *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (2018); *Raise a Flag: Works from the Indigenous Art Collection (2000–2015)* (2017); *Bonavista Biennale* (2017); *Awareness Series* (2017–18, 2016); *It's Complicated by the 007 Collective* (2017); *SakKijâjuk: Art and Craft from Nunatsiavut* (touring exhibition, 2016–2017, 2017, 2018); *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (2016–17); *Community Freezer* (2016); *Keeping Record: The Documentary Impulse in Inuit Art* (2016); *SakKijâjuk: Labrador Inuit Art* (2015); *New Voices: An Exhibition of Recent Acquisitions, Part 2* (2015); *Urban Inuit, Barry Pottle Photographs* (2015); and *At Home and Away, the Photographs of Barry Pottle and Chris Sampson* (2015). Barry's work is held in collections at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Canadian Museum of History, Carleton University (Equity Department), the City of Ottawa Art Collection, the Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development Aboriginal Art Centre, the National Gallery of Canada, the Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, the Collection of the Nunatsiavut Government, and the University of Washington Seattle Canadian Studies Centre. His work is also held in private collections.

For this special issue of *KULA* on Indigenous Knowledges, Barry shared a selection of photographs from the last ten years of his practice as a photographer with curator and visual anthropologist Andrea Walsh. Their short conversation is interwoven with selected photographs accompanied by captions written by Pottle. Readers will find links to Pottle's photography website (<https://barrypottle.com>)

next to some images, where they can access video of the artist speaking about his work as well as print downloads of his CV and exhibition record. This conversation between Barry and Andrea provides insight into the artist's process of learning the art and technical processes of photography as well as why his photographs matter in the process of Canadians facing their complicities in Canada's ongoing colonialism. Pottle's practice produces unique knowledge about Inuit culture and history through his eyes as an urban Inuk photographer.

ANDREA: You are a self-trained artist. Tell me about the journey you have taken to become known as one of the first professional urban Inuk art photographers in Canada.

BARRY: I began taking pictures back in 2005–2007, but I was working from the perspective of photojournalism. My approach to photography was a form of documentation. I would attend urban Inuit gatherings and take pictures of the activities at the events, of the people in attendance, and then I'd pass them along to anyone interested in producing a story for a paper or a magazine. Here in Ottawa we have a large urban Inuit community that has been building over the last forty to fifty years, and there are also a lot of Inuit organizations. I took pictures early on in my career from what I would describe as "a family perspective" or one from my place as an Inuk community member; I wasn't representing anyone or any organization.

I didn't consciously move my practice into art photography, but it moved in this direction naturally between 2007 and 2009. Around that time, I was thinking about how photography wasn't an identified genre in Inuit art; it wasn't even in a developing stage. Around this time, too, I happened to acquire a "real" camera through Club Z points. It was a 35 mm film camera, and I started taking pictures using that camera. From this point forward, I called what I was doing Contemporary Urban Inuit Art Photography.



Figure 1: *Silver Spoon 2* (2013), digital photograph. Taken during opening events at Larga Baffin Residence (medical residence for Baffin patients) in Ottawa. With this image I wanted to highlight traditional Inuit foods during a contemporary event in Ottawa as a way of illustrating the fusing of traditional and contemporary Inuit life in the city. It also speaks to how sometimes we are born with a silver spoon in our mouth! Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 2: *Cultural Teachings. Larga Baffin Opening* (2009), digital photograph. This image was taken at the opening of Larga Baffin Residence in 2009. The Elder was teaching about the meaning and usages (traditional and contemporary) of the Qulliq (traditional Inuit seal oil lamp). Traditionally it was used for cooking, heating, and drying cloth. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.

ANDREA: What effect has your photography had on audiences outside of your home territory?

BARRY: Well, mainstream audiences don't know a lot about Inuit and even less about urban Inuit. I have received a lot of support for my work from these audiences who repeatedly tell me that the photographs have taught them about history they didn't know existed. I get many comments and reactions from two series I created early on in my work: *Awareness* (2011), which is nineteen photographs of Inuit identification tags with portraits of the people who wore them (<https://barrypottle.com/portfolio/awareness-series/>), and *Foodland Security* (2012), which is fifteen photographs of country foods (<https://barrypottle.com/portfolio/foodland-security/>). I think that the biggest contribution my work has made has been to bring awareness to non-Inuit across Canada about Inuit lives, whether that be introducing people to our traditional country foods or putting the faces of real people next to identification tags they were forced to wear by the Canadian government. The images are powerful and meaningful and bring awareness to our culture and contemporary life.



Figure 3: *Mamattuk (Delicious)* (2012), digital photograph. For Inuit, whale bubbler (mattaaq/utsuk) is healthy and delicious, a superfood if you will, that continues to sustain Inuit life and culture, and at times it is considered a real delicacy when received. This image depicts country food at a traditional Inuit feast. Country food is very important to Inuit, and the *Foodland Security* series is about access to country food by Inuit in an urban setting. It is also about creating and elevating urban Inuit art photography to a high art form. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 4: *Awareness 1* (2012), digital photograph. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 5: *Awareness 2* (2012), digital photograph. This series of photographs brings an awareness to a subject that is not known within Canadian mainstream society. The Eskimo Identification Program was developed by the Canadian government in the 1940s (and operated until the late 1970s/early '80s) as a way of identifying Inuit using numbers. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.

ANDREA: Much of your work over the years is seen in series format, and some of these series are noted as “ongoing.” Looking at your body of work over the years, the idea of a series is more than a group of related images; it seems to be about related time frames in which your photographs were made or related contexts in which they were created. Given your inclination to produce these series, how do you feel your work has evolved—technically as well as through chosen subject matter?

BARRY: Early on I was focused on getting the image “right.” My concern was less about the technical aspects of an image and more about its composition or the context in which I was creating the picture. This was the focus of my practice for the first seven to eight years. More recently and at present my interest is growing around the technical aspects of photography and getting a better picture with my camera along those lines. I want to be able to develop my technical skills as an artist who is using a camera. I am interested in exploring printing images as well as capturing them. So, my practice has evolved from a focus on specific Inuit iconography to embracing a more open approach to subject matter. I want to be able to go beyond photographing Inuit subjects. Though that’s my bread and butter—always keeping in mind where I come from and the values I carry. But where can I go from there? I think a lot about how being an Inuk has affected the way that I experience bigger global economic, environmental, and societal events, and how I can express those experiences in my photographs. I’ve been creating a series about ice for the last three to four years. Every winter and spring I take my camera and work on this series. In addition, I learnt that art is a process and working through that process is exuberating, fun, challenging, and rewarding at the same time. The process allows room for conceptualization, creativity, challenges, and at times chance encounters leading to unexpected results.



Figure 6: *Where Are You Now Brigitte Bardot?* (2008), digital photograph. Climate change and global warming are real and happening now. Inuit regions and the Arctic are melting. I question where are all people, where are their voices and uproar about climate change and its effect on Inuit and global communities. Where are the Brigitte Bardots when we need them? Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 7: *Policy Gone Awry* (2008), digital photograph. This picture speaks to climate change within the urban perspective. If we do not combat the changes to climate then we are in serious trouble. In this work I am asking us to consider the policies and programs for climate change that are in front of us. If we do not develop strong policies and implement them to fight climate change then the results will be devastating. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.

ANDREA: As a photographer who produces digital images, do you have a process for working post-production in preparation for printing photographs?

BARRY: I don't manipulate my images with Photoshop or Lightroom. What you see is what you get. I guess I'm a purist at heart. I feel that when I take a photograph, it becomes a trace of the moment I encountered a person, or was witness to an event, or humbled by an object such as a flower. If I manipulate the image post-production, it takes away from the authenticity of that moment in which I took the photograph. In essence it's not the same photograph. Sometimes I'll take an image and let it sit for a while, then take it out and possibly reconceptualize its purpose as either part of a series or a one-off print. I like this part of the creation process where I can sit and think about an image. If I like it I'll put it aside; if I don't, I'll delete it. I don't work out of a studio. I have not done any studio photography where I purposefully set up a photograph. Many of my photographs come from my travel through different regions, close to and further afield from my home in Ottawa. When I travel, I think about who were the people who were here originally? And where are they living now?



Figure 8: *Watertown Memories* (2013), digital photograph. This image was taken at Brown's Marina on Indian Lake, Ontario. The building reminded me of back home in Labrador; travelling by boat brought back memories of being in boats and on the land. I think it was the stillness of the image that stirred up those memories. This building is now up on land with the intent of it being restored by the owner. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 9: *Capelin Roll, Middle Cove, NL* (2018), digital photograph. The Capelin roll is an annual event in Newfoundland; it is when the Capelin come in to spawn and lay their eggs. The Capelin roll is a cultural activity as well. Everyone comes to get their fill of Capelin for food, and the Capelin is also gathered to use as fertilizer on gardens. People from all around come to partake in the Capelin roll. It has evolved into a cultural and community event and at times a tourist activity. Here I wanted to see if I could get an image of them actually rolling. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 10: *a (syllabics series)* (2015), digital photograph. From my *syllabics series* (<https://barrypottle.com/portfolio/syllabics-project-2017-ongoing/>). The *syllabics series* speaks to how our National Inuit Organization, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, has developed a standardized Inuit writing system based on Roman orthography, Inuktitut Qaliujaaqpait. As I go around my regions, I find images that speak to and look like Inuit syllabics. I am attempting to bring awareness to this subject matter and also trying to push the limits of photography. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.

ANDREA: When I listen to you speak about your process of creating photographs, I feel that they come from two principal ways of working. Would you let me know if this is accurate? The first way of working stems from an unplanned, or non-scripted, encounter between you and your subject. These photographs are traces of your gut reactions, or your responses, to what you see at events (urban gatherings, etc.) or experience on your travels (the Capelin roll). The other way of working begins as a deeply contemplative and purposeful idea for which the photographs become nodes through which you can be in dialogue with your audiences (Inuit identification tags). These multimodal ways of working produce photographic images through which human/animal/environmental relations flow.

The result of these ways of working does not produce an expectation of a coveted object (the printed image). Rather, your photographs create a coveted opportunity for your viewers to engage or to see the world differently or uniquely from your perspective as an urban Inuk. Sometimes this is about presenting subject matter that is completely foreign to non-Inuit (such as food delicacies like whale blubber), and in other instances people like myself who are outside Inuit culture are compelled to consider this bigger message in your work through a re-examination of the familiar (such as gardens and peony flowers).

BARRY: Exactly. This way of describing how I take photographs is basically accurate, but it just depends on the photograph I have in my mind, or the intentions I have in mind for the photograph. I don't let my ideas or my practice get confined to any particular method. In terms of whether and how my audiences see the photographs I create as foreign or familiar, I'm always exploring and thinking about the landscape and the people and plants and animals that inhabit those places. The photographs ask us to consider our assumptions about each other and also our values as we look at them.

Growing up in Labrador, we were often out on the land, and there was flora and fauna, and we experienced all of this when we travelled to pick berries, for example. In Ontario, where I live now, I can just walk out my door and take pictures in a garden. Taking pictures of urban flowers is about keeping my skills up to date and testing the waters about what can and can't be done in terms of flower photography. I'm conscious of the southern light and its effect in creating contrast in the texture of the petals and leaves and my own sense of composition regarding flowers and photography.

All of my photographs are about what it means to me to be Inuk. The difference between my images and the hundreds of thousands of photographs of Inuit that are in government archives are that my photographs come from within. Audiences for my photographs see a picture created by someone who was there as a member of the culture. I think this is different than looking at a photograph taken by someone who was observing culture, but not living it. I want to show that Inuit culture is alive and strong and growing. My practice speaks to events that are taking place today that are dynamic, not static. Taking pictures for me is about dispelling the narrative of our disappearance. We are here. My photographs describe who is around in Ottawa in this time we are living now, what they are doing as individuals and also as a collective of people. Ultimately, it's only me as an individual speaking through my photographs, and how I see the world will be different from another Inuk's perspective. When I think about photography this way the sky's the limit in terms of ideas and concepts.



Figure 11: *Yale Dormitory (Residential School) North West River Labrador* (2015), digital photograph. I spent five years (1970–75) at Yale Dorm. There were residential schools in Newfoundland and Labrador. To kill the Indian in the child applied to Inuit as well. I took this photo in 2015, knowing that I may not see this place again. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 12: *Johnny Hill, Happy Valley-Goose Bay* (2015), digital photograph. This is the street (Cabot) where we moved after relocating from Rigolet to Happy Valley-Goose Bay in 1967. Johnny Hill was our childhood playground. We played, fought, had fun, and explored the area. It is basically a sand hill. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.



Figure 13: *Beginning of Botany Boy Pottle* (2019), digital photograph. In this photograph I am experimenting with the limits of what can be considered an Inuit art photograph. My interests in subject matter are varied; with *Botany Boy* I am exploring the theme of botany. How might this work in relation to my other photographs and practice? These recent pictures of flowers make me ask myself when and where and what does botany mean to me as an artist. Photo © 2021 Barry Pottle. All rights reserved.

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- Pottle, Barry. 2017. *Syllabics Series*. <https://barrypottle.com/portfolio/syllabics-project-2017-ongoing/>. Archived at: <https://perma.cc/V4P5-BY7V>.

Exhibitions

- Pottle, Barry. ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ / *Among All These Tundras* (group exhibition). Onsite Gallery, Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto, Ontario, September 18–December 7, 2019. <https://www2.ocadu.ca/event/ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ-ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ-among-all-these-tundras>. Archived at: <https://perma.cc/KY3B-632M>.
- Pottle, Barry. *Future Possible: Art of Newfoundland and Labrador from 1949 to Present* (group exhibition). The Rooms Provincial Museum, St. John's, Newfoundland, May 18–September 22, 2019.
- Pottle, Barry. ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ / *Among All These Tundras* (group exhibition). Esker Foundation, Calgary, Alberta, June 1–August 30, 2019. <https://barrypottle.com/2019/06/02/exhibition-among-all-these-tundras-esker-foundation/>. Archived at: <https://perma.cc/U4FZ-D42L>.
- Pottle, Barry. *No Borders Art Festival* (group exhibition). Nectar Centre, Ottawa, Ontario, May 11–25, 2019.
- Pottle, Barry. *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (group show). Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Nome, Alaska, March 2019.
- Pottle, Barry. *Kaleidoscope: 2018 Additions to the City of Ottawa Art Collection* (group exhibition). City of Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, December 6, 2018–January 30, 2019.
- Pottle, Barry. *Flash Photography Festival*, Winnipeg Art Gallery Gift Shop, Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ / *Among All These Tundras* (group exhibition). Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, September 4–October 27, 2018.

- Pottle, Barry. *Gathering Place* (group exhibition). Ontario Legislative Assembly, Toronto, Ontario, December 18, 2017–December 31, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *Barry Pottle: Urban Inuit Photography* (solo exhibition). ShowWAG, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Friday, May 25–August 22, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *Àdisòkàmagan / Nous connaître un peu nous-mêmes / We'll All Become Stories* (group exhibition). Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, April 28–September 16, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (group exhibition). Institute of Native American Arts, Sante Fe, New Mexico, February 16–July 29, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *Raise a Flag: Works from the Indigenous Art Collection (2000-2015)* (group exhibition). Onsite Gallery, Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto, Ontario, September 16–December 10, 2017.
- Pottle, Barry. *Bonavista Biennale* (group exhibition). Bonavista, Newfoundland, August 15–September 15, 2017.
- Pottle, Barry. *Awareness Series* (solo exhibition). Hamilton Art Gallery, Hamilton, Ontario, June 28, 2017–January 14, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *It's Complicated by the 007 Collective* (group exhibition). Central Art Garage, Ottawa, Ontario, June 15–July 31, 2017.
- Pottle, Barry. *SakKijâjuk: Art and Craft from Nunatsiavut* (group exhibition–touring). The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland, October 8, 2016–January 15, 2017; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 17–September 10, 2017; Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, May 26–October 14, 2018.
- Pottle, Barry. *Without Boundaries: Visual Conversations* (group exhibition). Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, Alaska, September 30, 2016–February 12, 2017.
- Pottle, Barry. *Community Freezer* presented by iNuit Blanche (group exhibition). Eastern Edge Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland, October 8–21, 2016.
- Pottle, Barry. *Awareness Series* (solo exhibition). Feheley Fine Arts, Toronto, Ontario, May 28–July 30, 2016.
- Pottle, Barry. *Keeping Record: The Documentary Impulse in Inuit Art* (group exhibition). Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, May 2–August 28, 2016.
- Pottle, Barry. *SakKijâjuk: Labrador Inuit Art* (group exhibition). Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Newfoundland, November 19–23, 2015.
- Pottle, Barry. *New Voices: An Exhibition of Recent Acquisitions, Part 2* (group exhibition). Aboriginal Art Centre, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Gatineau, Quebec, September–December 31, 2015.
- Pottle, Barry. *Urban Inuit, Barry Pottle Photographs* (solo exhibition). Feheley Fine Arts, Toronto, Ontario, May–July 2015.
- Pottle, Barry. *At Home and Away, the Photographs of Barry Pottle and Chris Sampson*. Bruin Provincial Museum (a division of the Rooms), St. John's, Newfoundland, May–October 2015.

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