

Eldred Allen. Resemblance: Portrait of an Inuit Community. The Rooms Art Gallery and Museum

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Eldred Allen. *Resemblance: Portrait of an Inuit Community*. The Rooms Art Gallery and Museum, 26 October 2021–24 April 2022.

In September 1892, the *Evelena* sailed out of Rigolet harbour with 60 Labrador Inuit on board, bound for Chicago.¹ The passengers had agreed to work as performers at the “Esquimaux Village” in the World’s Columbian Exposition, an imperial fairground featuring “primitive” people from around the globe. Inuit families from the Rigolet area had joined the group, including Peter Palliser and his nephew Tom Palliser, as well as those from farther north along the coast. Agents with the American outfit J.W. Skiles & Co. had recruited them by promising good wages and an adventure. What they found in Chicago was vastly different.

The “Esquimaux Village” was a collection of leaky, poorly built shacks where the families were expected to pose in sealskin clothing and perform for paying visitors. Racism and exploitation became daily experiences. An American audience hungry for the exotic examined the Inuit performers in their living exhibit and bought photographs of them in racially stereotyped scenes designed to illustrate their foreign nature.² But “authenticity” was key to representation, and sealskin clothing signified Inuit. When Peter Palliser and Tom Palliser walked out of the enclosure wearing jeans instead of sealskins, the organizers panicked. As Nigel Markham has so wonderfully described, the performers’ refusal to abide by oppressive stereotypes resulted in a revolt, a court case, and a fierce challenge to American assumptions about Inuit.³ But the photographs circulated and the image of “traditional” Labrador Inuit became firmly embedded in the North American imagination.

One hundred and thirty years later, an Inuk photographer's exhibit presents an entirely different understanding of Inuit portraiture. Eldred Allen's *Resemblance* was displayed from October 2021 to April 2022 at The Rooms Art Gallery and Museum in St. John's, NL. This work consists of a series of 30 black-and-white portraits of Elders from his hometown of Rigolet. The rows of photos covered two walls of the alcove, each dignified face framed by shadows and a black background. Most of the men and women pictured look off into the distance, while a few gaze good-humouredly into the camera.

Allen is an established landscape photographer; these photos are his first foray into taking portraits. But he has made the transition skilfully. His sensitive and relational approach to photographing his subjects is immediately evident: Eldred Allen is first and foremost a community member, grandson, and cousin. His process involved inviting Rigolet Elders to his studio, where a simple setup provided a straightforward photography session. He photographed his grandparents first and gradually built trust and interest among other community residents in participating. By sharing the photos widely on Facebook, Allen honoured the Elders with their families and shared ownership of the portraits. The images therefore emerged from these relationships; the exhibit is a community-wide celebration of the people whose life experience and wisdom render them vital to Rigolet. These are the leaders, the fishermen, the residential school survivors, the first generation to live in town year-round.⁴ These Elders are the foundation of the families, as Allen says, and the roots of Rigolet.⁵

The title *Resemblance* also alludes to these relationships, in the familial resemblances between the Elders and their relatives in the community, both present and past. In this series of faces are the grandfathers and grandmothers of most families in Rigolet; almost everyone in the town can see something of themselves reflected. The exhibit's references thus all point inward, tracing the social connections that tie people together in the small community.

This intimate and inclusive collection is a world away from the performative pieces of the Chicago Exposition. Allen's portraits relate

to each other and to their community; the Elders agreed to be documented for their own families rather than for any external audience. Unfortunately, the exhibit is also a world away from Rigolet, and few Elders and their relatives were able to travel to St. John's to see it at The Rooms. It is Allen's hope that he can mount the exhibit in the community at some point.⁶ So while public interest in Inuit portraiture endures, the Elders, some of whom are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Inuit who went to Chicago in 1892, are today commemorated for their experience, their families, and their role in Rigolet.⁷ In *Resemblance*, Allen has created an affectionate portrait of and with his community, this time illustrating their own priorities and on their own terms.

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Notes

1. Nigel Markham, "Labrador Inuit and the World's Columbian Exposition," MA thesis (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2020).
2. Jim Zwick, *Inuit Entertainers in the United States: From the Chicago World's Fair through the Birth of Hollywood* (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2006).
3. Markham, "Labrador Inuit."
4. Andrea Procter, *A Long Journey: Residential Schools in Labrador and Newfoundland* (St. John's: Memorial University Press, 2020).
5. Eldred Allen, Curator's notes, *Resemblance*, The Rooms, 2022.
6. Personal communication, Eldred Allen, March 2022.
7. Thanks to Patty Way and Nigel Markham for their genealogical information.