

# Mural painted by Inuit youth brightens east end Montreal parking lot



*CHRISTOPHER CURTIS, MONTREAL GAZETTE*

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Large mural on the side of a building on Ontario St. E. in Montreal Wednesday August 10, 2016 created by four Inuit artists, teenagers from Nunavut. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Johnny Samayualie doesn't know where he got the idea to draw a fish coming out of a man's nose.

For that matter, he can't explain why a sort of psychedelic tongue is gushing out of the gentleman's eye. It just came to him, he says.

Whatever his process is, 15-year-old Samayualie and four other Inuit youth travelled to Montreal from Nunavut last month to paint a mural onto a building that overlooks a parking lot east of downtown.

"I don't know what's going on there, I just drew it," says Samayualie, whose shirt and shoes were covered in paint splashes. "I like the eyes."

The mural is a surreal scene from Canada's north, blending a melting igloo on an iceberg, a man's head resting on a walrus and seals swimming inside the animal among other imagery. At the base of the painting, two people appear to be pulling the entire piece on their snow mobile.

Toronto art collective Embassy of Imagination

(<http://www.embassyofimagination.com/>) coordinated the project, selecting Samayualie along with fellow teenagers Parr Josephee, Saaki Nuna, Tommy Quvianaqtuliaq and Salomonie Ashoona after a series of workshops in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. It took the teens eight days to complete the mural.



Left to right, Salomonie Ashoona, Saaki Nuna, Parr Josephee, Tommy Quvianaqtuliaq and Johnny Samayualie all Inuit artists pictured shortly before the creation of a large-scale mural on Ontario St. E. in Montreal. *MUMTL.ORG*

“It feels good, like seeing my drawing on a big wall is amazing,” said 14-year-old Saaki Nuna, whose father and oldest brother are both stone carvers. “I drew a melting igloo and an iceberg because it made me think of climate change... I’ve tried many, many times to build and igloo but always failed.”

MU (<http://www.mumtl.org/en/>), a Montreal group dedicated to creating art in neighbourhoods across the city, helped the project locally.

“The idea is to give these kids a voice, to give them a platform to communicate something from their world all the way down here,” said Alexa Hatanaka, one of the project’s facilitators. “And at the same time, for people in the city, they walk by it and hopefully they engage with and ask themselves, ‘What’s my connection to the north? What do I know about this place?’”

Hatanaka says the piece blends the human and animal world in a way that is typical of Inuit art but should stand out in an urban setting.

The mural, which stands near the corner of Ontario St. E. and Dufresne St., is the second in a project by Embassy of Imagination that aims to provide young Inuit artists exposure in urban Canada.

For some of the young artists, it was their first time leaving the north. Though they looked somewhat worn out on Tuesday — the kids alternated between chasing each other through the parking lot and sitting in the shade as beads of sweat rolled down their faces — they walked away with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

“Every one (of us) is proud,” said Nuna. “We worked on this for months.”

Last year, the art collective worked with another group from Cape Dorset on a mural in honour of the Pan Am Games in Toronto.

Next year, Hatanaka and fellow artist Patrick Thompson will recruit a new class of teenagers and accompany them to Ottawa, where they’ll create something for Canada’s 150th anniversary. Funding from the project comes from Canada Council for the Arts, the Nunavut government and several arts foundations.

“It was a huge learning curve to tackle a wall this big, but I think it’s an important thing to work through and come together and finish,” said Hatanaka. “If they’re feeling low it’s something they can look back to and realize, ‘I can accomplish a lot. My talent means something. It’s special. It’s cool.’”

[ccurtis@postmedia.com \(mailto:ccurtis@postmedia.com\)](mailto:ccurtis@postmedia.com)

[Twitter.com/titocurtis \(http://ccurtis@postmedia.com\)](http://ccurtis@postmedia.com)

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