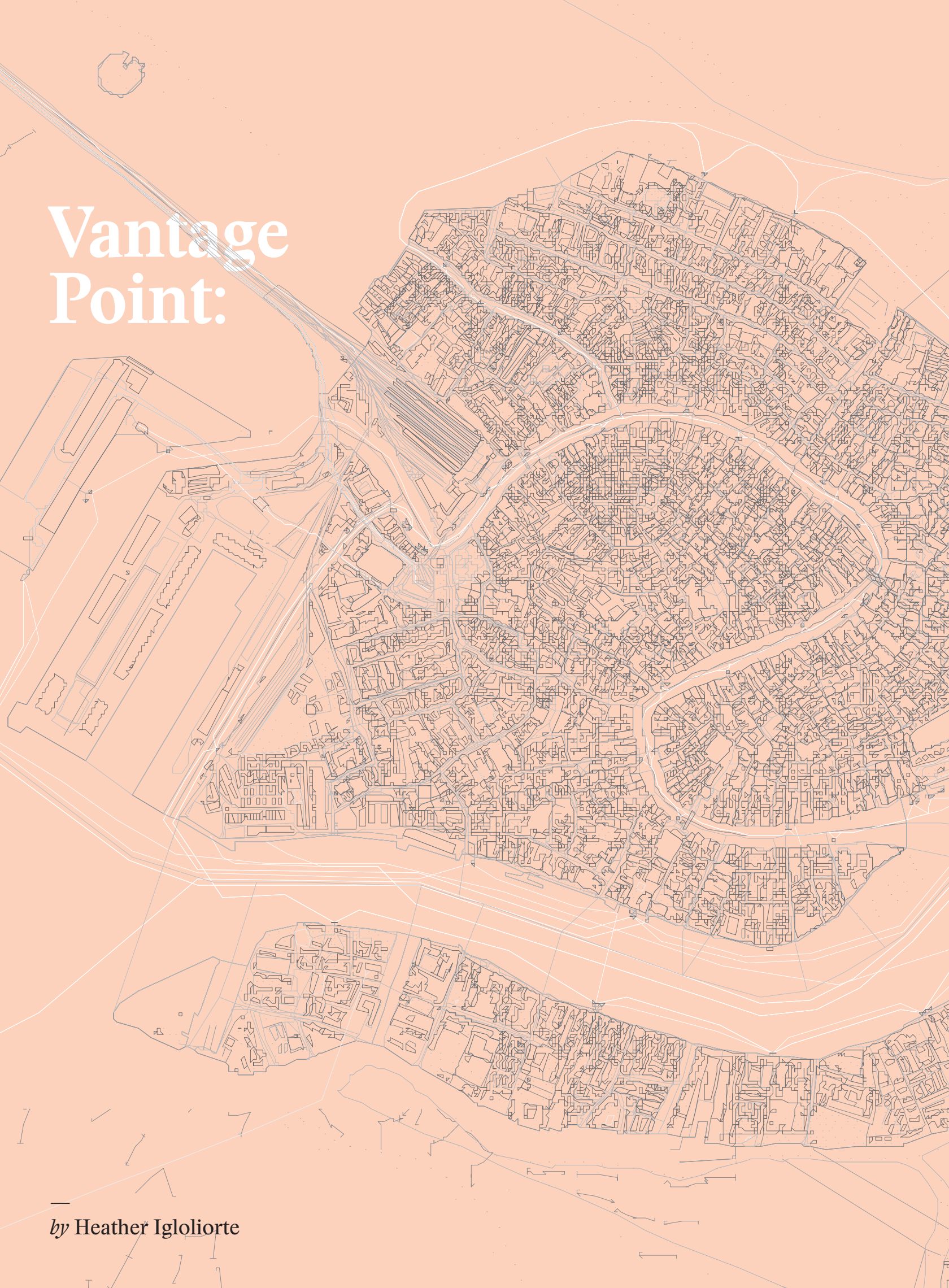
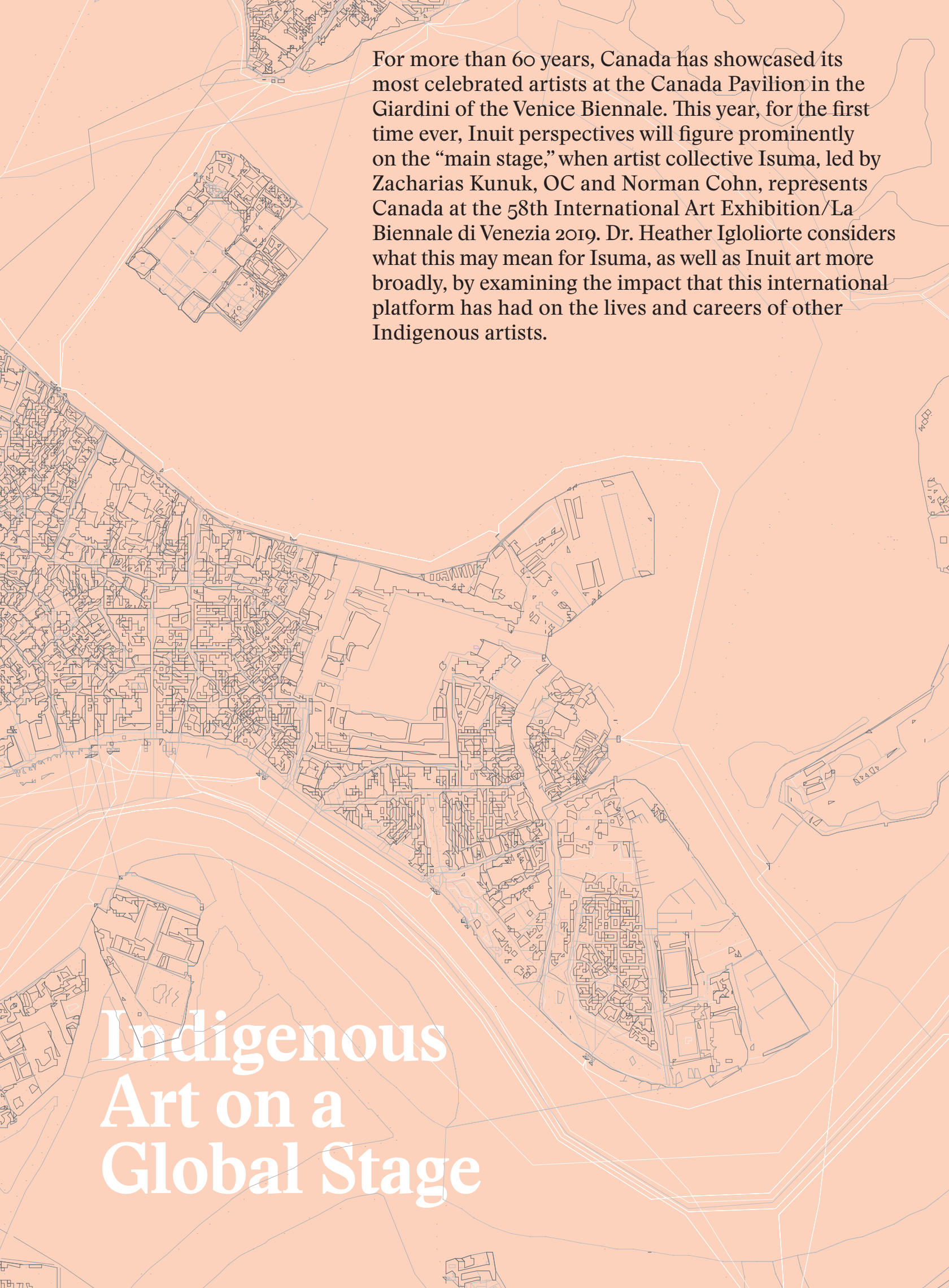


# Vantage Point:



by Heather Igloliorte



For more than 60 years, Canada has showcased its most celebrated artists at the Canada Pavilion in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale. This year, for the first time ever, Inuit perspectives will figure prominently on the “main stage,” when artist collective Isuma, led by Zacharias Kunuk, OC and Norman Cohn, represents Canada at the 58th International Art Exhibition/La Biennale di Venezia 2019. Dr. Heather Igloliorte considers what this may mean for Isuma, as well as Inuit art more broadly, by examining the impact that this international platform has had on the lives and careers of other Indigenous artists.

# Indigenous Art on a Global Stage



BELOW  
**Edward Poitras**  
*Untitled*  
1995  
Mixed-media installation  
COURTESY CANADIAN MUSEUM  
OF HISTORY

RIGHT  
**Lori Blondeau**  
*Grace*  
2007  
Documentation of  
performance in Venice  
COURTESY THE ARTIST  
PHOTO SHELLEY NIRO

For over a century, Venice, Italy, has been host to biennales of art, as well as architecture, cinema, dance, music and theatre. The Giardini Pubblici, a lushly forested park, featuring numerous national pavilions located in the southeast of Venice and built under Napoleon Bonaparte at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is host to alternating annual festivals of art and architecture. Beginning in 1980 with the 1st International Architecture Exhibition, a second major venue was added to the Biennale, the Arsenale di Venezia, a massive complex of armaments and shipyard warehouses repurposed into exhibition spaces.<sup>1</sup> Exhibiting in either of these main venues or numerous other key sites across the city during the Biennale can play a critical role in shaping an artists' career, catapulting nationally acclaimed artists into global recognition.

Having already contributed so much to the film and video landscape, including making groundbreaking documentaries, television and feature films, creating their own online open-access platform for sharing theirs and other Indigenous films and showing their work in theatres as well as festivals, galleries and art fairs such as documenta 11 and 14, Isuma is no stranger to international recognition. And yet, what are the implications of having Isuma, a community-based, principally Inuktitut-language video art collective based in Iglulik, NU, represent Canada at arguably the world's most visible and scrutinized international art event? To put this opportunity into a national and international artistic context, I asked other global Indigenous artists, curators and arts professionals from Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Greenland to share their past experiences of exhibiting in Venice and to reflect on what it has meant for their careers and creative development in the present.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that these countries, which share similar histories of settler-colonialism and which have been grappling with these difficult histories in the present, have all, in recent decades, begun to select Indigenous artists to represent them at what many consider to be the world's foremost art festival. "This should be the core that





“Indigenous art is now received on a different level because of the rigorous work and worth of many generations.”

we are putting forward,” explains Ryan Rice, Associate Dean, Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences, at OCAD University and co-curator of *The Requickening Project* (2007). “Indigenous art is now received on a different level because of the rigorous work and worth of many generations. Acknowledgement also comes through a form of reparation [and] comprehension that the sovereignty of our languages, arts, knowledges and practices have endured and remain vital, current and critical.”

What follows is not a comprehensive overview of all the Indigenous artists who have shown in Venice, but a closer look at some projects and individuals whose experiences provide insights into what this might mean for Isuma, and for Inuit artists more broadly. All set against the backdrop of an event that is equal parts prestige and spectacle, where the city’s population doubles in size during preview week with crowds of wealthy patrons and artists alike. As artist Lori Blondeau explains, the Biennale “is Carnivale for visual artists.”

Within a Canadian context, only Rebecca Belmore in 2005 and before her Edward Poitras in 1995—curated by Gerald McMaster, the first Indigenous curator from Canada to have worked in Venice—had presented solo exhibitions in the Canada Pavilion of the Giardini prior to Isuma, while other notable Canadian Indigenous artists and collaborative projects have been shown in the Arsenale venue and elsewhere in the city. “Showing in Venice is an opportunity to mobilize and insert our practices, creativity and bodies within an established and somewhat shifting global dialogue or cultural economy,” says Rice. “Our presence addresses recognition and indicates our arrival in spaces where we were not included, known or welcome.” Following the projects by Poitras and Belmore, Rice co-curated *The Requickening Project* with Chiricahua Apache curator and academic Nancy Mithlo, which featured Cree/Métis/Saulteaux performance artist Lori Blondeau and Mohawk photographer and filmmaker Shelley Niro. The project stemmed from Mithlo’s longstanding and dedicated efforts to exhibit Indigenous artists in Venice, which spans two decades, beginning with the 1999 exhibition *Ceremonial* and, most recently, featuring the exhibition *Wah.shka* in 2017.

*The Requickening Project* ran for five consecutive days and featured a sunrise and sunset performance by Blondeau each day, *Grace* (2007), followed by a screening of Niro’s *Tree* (2006) each evening. Rice explains: “Our project emanated from the Haudenosaunee philosophy of ‘requickening,’ to bring back spirit; we also took the opportunity

to honour the late artist Harry Fonseca (who participated in Mithlo’s first project).” As Blondeau explains, “There was a group consensus not to pay to become an official collateral project; it was more grassroots in nature. Being away from the gardens actually gave us the advantage of having more local people come.”

Blondeau distinctly appreciates the perspective of Venetian audiences, whom she felt were receptive despite any language or cultural divides. “*Grace* is about life and death, the beginning and end, and time, and how the time we keep in the Western world is not the time we keep in the Indigenous world. The audience got it.” Considering Isuma’s representation at the Biennale, she notes, “When Edward [Poitras] and Rebecca [Belmore] showed there, it was such a huge thing, I remember. And now Isuma is there too. I think it is important to recognize them like this because of the great work they do. Not only in what they produce, but also the way they involve the whole community in their work.”

Jordan Bennett, a Mi’kmaq multimedia artist from Ktaqamkuk (Newfoundland), exhibited the installation *ice fishing* (2014) in the 2015 Biennale. To experience the work, you must enter through a recreated ice fishing shack; through that portal you are transported to the frozen lake behind Bennett’s family home, both through an evocative video work and, convincingly, through the ice fishing holes that appear to have been drilled with an ice auger directly into the gallery floor. Inside the holes audiences can peer into the watery depths below, waiting for a bite. The lines on the fishing poles even jump when a fish nibbles on the line—and the appearance of fish swimming up to the holes made visitors to the seemingly floating city startle at the sight.

*ice fishing* showed in Venice as a part of a two-person show with Anne Troake, titled *Under the Surface*, organized by the not-for-profit Terra Nova Art Foundation. It was a first for Bennett and for his people. “When I [was] selected I was really excited—first, because I was probably the first Mi’kmaq artist to show on any level at Venice, not to mention a young Newfoundlander—but I was really excited when *ice fishing* was selected, because I wanted to show perspectives of home on the world stage.”

Bennett vehemently believes that showing in Venice is impactful on artists careers and creative trajectories. “It does so much, and not just for the nation or community being exhibited. While everyone in Canada supports the Canadian artist, for Indigenous peoples, they’re not only representing Canada, they’re also repping all of us.”



This is all the more significant given that Indigenous artists have only recently begun to take up such international contemporary art spaces. “In Venice, it shows people who don’t have any knowledge of Indigenous peoples that we are here, now, making groundbreaking work. They [international audiences] are used to thinking of us in the past tense—like, oh the Mi’kmaq people did this in the past, they used to make that—and now they see that we are here, representing all of Turtle Island in the present.”

Likewise, in the United States, a small number of Indigenous artists and curators have been pushing against the often rigid boundaries of the Biennale for decades as well.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Mithlo is currently writing a whole book, *A/Part of This World: Indigenous Curation at the Venice Biennale*, on the subject of her Native American exhibitions in Venice alone. During the 2017 Biennale, Zuecca Projects, a non-profit cultural organization founded by Alessandro Possati, organized *INDIAN WATER – The Native American Pavilion*, featuring artists Nicholas Galanin and Oscar Tuazon; this year they are continuing in their efforts to feature artists from across Turtle Island in their pavilion, inviting Alan Michelson, Nadia Myre and Jeff Thomas as part of the exhibition *Volume 0*. Additionally, artists from New Zealand and Australia as well as other circumpolar communities have begun showing on this international platform. Lisa Reihana, a Māori artist of Ngāpuhi descent, represented New Zealand when she exhibited in the Tese dell’Isolotto building of the central Arsenale complex in 2017. The exhibition *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, featured a single, painstakingly crafted and deeply moving work, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*—a 23.5 metre long by 3.3 metre high projected video with soundscape that takes the form of a living wallpaper, based on the French scenic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804–5), which imagines the Indigenous peoples Captain Cook encountered on his voyages in the South Pacific. “Participating in the Venice Biennale builds your profile and your resilience like nothing else,” explains Reihana. “It’s a major logistical undertaking, and the pressure is on to deliver a great work. There’s a Nation’s noise that surrounds the event and endless meetings at all levels from creative to media to catalogue design. I’d shown my first cut of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, and felt reassured I had a good work to present, but I wanted to upgrade it and contextualize the content with additional photos and sculptures.”

The finished work is both an astounding technical feat and an insightful and nuanced masterwork on the complex narrative of colonial contact between Cook’s crew and Pacific Islanders. The “wallpaper” seamlessly scrolls, first depicting scenes from the many

nations before contact through to the first arrival of Cook’s tall ship and the encounters that must have followed, acted out by the living descendants of those nations. Given the monumentality of the work, it is no surprise this work of great historical accuracy took Reihana over a decade to complete.

Reflecting on the significance of showing in Venice, but also on representing her people in this context, Reihana is quick to acknowledge the high level of support she received to do so. “It was amazing to share this important moment with whānau, friends and the incredible supporters who helped bring it to fruition, of which Creative New Zealand played a vital part.” Since its presentation in Venice, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* has toured to additional international venues and will continue to be presented well into the 2020s. The piece, Reihana says is, “about the community of people in it, who worked on it and are represented by *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*. It has made many people from home, indeed worldwide extremely proud, and for those that were unfamiliar with Māori and Pacific peoples, this has piqued their curiosity.”

In addition to Reihana, Tracey Moffatt’s *My Horizon* took over the Australian Pavilion in 2017. While many Australian Indigenous artists have participated in group exhibitions, notably Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls in 1990, Hetti Perkins, Victoria Lynn and Brenda L. Croft in 1997, followed by Vernon Ah Kee in 2009, Moffatt is the first solo artist featured within the austere pavilion. The exhibition featured two large-scale photo series and two video works that draw on cinematic tropes from Old Hollywood, film noir and documentary to reveal complex histories of Indigenous and migrant experiences in Australia.

“Being there and hearing from the artist [Moffatt] herself, someone who not only had been influential in my connection to and understanding of art, but has also been an important figure in Australian art, made the reality of an Aboriginal artist taking over the Australian Pavilion a real possibility and made it within reach,” says Yorta Yorta curator Kimberley Moulton, Senior Curator South Eastern Aboriginal Collections at Museums Victoria. “Seeing the fearless approach Moffatt and curator Natalie King took to highlighting Aboriginal and Refugee Rights on a world stage inspired me to think how our people can continue to hold space at the Biennale in the future. What can that look like? How do we have agency and create a culturally safe and powerful space within that world?”

In 2012 Greenlandic artist Bolatta Silis-Høegh was invited to create a domestic installation of a “Greenlandic home, showing Greenlandic history, development, presence and future” to be included



**Tracey Moffatt**  
*Heaven* (from the series *Passages*)  
 2017  
 Digital print  
 102 × 153 cm  
 COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY

TOP  
**Jordan Bennett**  
*ice fishing* (still)  
2014  
Video  
9 min 30 sec  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

BOTTOM  
Installation of **Lisa Reihana's**  
*in Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*  
(2015) in *Lisa Reihana:*  
*Emissaries*, New Zealand  
Pavilion, Venice, Italy, 2017  
COURTESY CREATIVE NEW ZEALAND





The selection of Isuma to represent Canada makes a bold statement about where we are as a country today and where we want to be.

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Bolatta Silis-Høegh  
*Ningiu*  
2012  
Mixed-media installation  
COURTESY THE ARTIST



in the Danish Pavilion at the Architecture Biennale the same year. “A home with warmth, a lot of family photos, relaxingly unpretentious and a contrast to the Architecture Biennale.” The interior of the installation, titled *Ningiu*, meaning grandmother, relayed the chronological history of its imaginary female inhabitant by a progression of photographic documentation that traced traditional life on the land through to having children and grandchildren, including various landmarks from Christmas celebrations to graduations, travels and more. The project provided the artist an opportunity to shift larger perspectives of Greenlandic culture and identity. “I loved telling a whole story like that, the warmth showing the importance of family in our culture throughout the changes of scenery. The rapid change in culture, but also how quickly we adapted to new surroundings holding hands with our culture, which I think is so beautiful.”

During the 2015 preview week, when thousands of artists, reporters and art cognoscenti descend on Venice en masse, Bennett was visited by then Associate Publisher of the *Inuit Art Quarterly* William Huffman, who brought him a copy of the most recent issue and interviewed him on the potential for future inclusion of Inuit artists in Venice. “They asked me, ‘Can you imagine an Inuit artist representing Canada at the Venice Biennale?’ And I said, ‘Most definitely, hopefully I will see that in my lifetime.’” At the following Biennale, the work of Inuk graphic artist Kananginak Pootoogook, RCA (1935–2010) was included in the Arsenale venue group exhibition *Viva Arte Viva* (2017), making him the first to hold that honour, albeit posthumously.

Now, only two years on, Zacharias Kunuk, OC becomes the second Inuk to represent Canada as one of the co-founders of Isuma alongside Norman Cohn, though this time at the official Canada Pavilion. Although, as Rice notes, it is a bit of a risk for Canada to position Isuma—a film collective led by Kunuk and Cohn, located in a remote community a world away from the ostentatious stage of Venice—as the representative for Canadian contemporary art. “Such recognition supports Canada’s distinct national identity and creative force. It sets a precedent for other museums and galleries to shift their prejudices and value the enormous wealth of our cultures that are distinct, specific, authentic and original to our land and nowhere else.” The selection of Isuma to represent Canada makes a bold statement about where we are as a country today and where we want to be. Ultimately, this choice has nothing to do with current discourses of “reconciliation,” and yet their work has everything to do with the history of colonization. By giving Isuma a global platform from which to untangle the brutal truth about the history of contact between Inuit and *qallunaat*, the National Gallery of Canada and the Biennale’s team of curators open space for the frank and urgent conversations we need to have about the ongoing legacies of colonialism and paternalism in the Arctic, while showing the world that we are not afraid to break down the myth of Canada and the North in order to move forward together. ■

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Giardini pavilions include those of Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Great Britain, France, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, United States of America, Denmark, Venice, Austria, Greece, Israel, Switzerland, Venezuela, Japan, Finland, Canada, Brazil, Uruguay, Australia, Korea and the Nordic Pavilion (Sweden, Norway and Finland). The Arsenale currently host the National Pavilions of Albania, Argentina, Chile, People’s Republic of China, Croatia, United Arab Emirates, Philippines, Georgia, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Republic of Kosovo, Latvia, Republic of North Macedonia, Malta, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Republic of Slovenia, Republic of South Africa, Tunisia and Turkey.
- <sup>2</sup> All quotes in this article are from personal communications with the author in February 2019, unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>3</sup> In addition to projects by Mithlo, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has supported collateral projects with performance artist James Luna and painter Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.