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Online art book spotlights celebrated Cape Dorset sculptor Oviloo Tunnillie, who defied Inuit social norms and carved her personal experiences into stone



TORONTO, ON — Oviloo Tunnillie (1949–2014) was born in Kangia, a hunting camp outside of Kinngait (Cape Dorset) in Nunavut. In the 1950s, at age five, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and forcibly removed from her family—twice—for treatment in southern hospitals. The artist would later recollect these experiences of trauma in her autobiographical sculptures, making her the only Inuit artist to reference the colonial mistreatment of Inuit patients directly in artwork.

Now, Tunnillie’s significant legacy as a pioneering artist is available for audiences around the world. The Art Canada Institute’s publication [*Oviloo Tunnillie: Life & Work*](#), by renowned author [*Darlene Coward Wight*](#), is available for free in both English and French from the ACI website.

As a woman carver Tunnillie challenged Inuit female social norms, as stone work was traditionally considered a man’s trade. Disinterested in sewing with her mother and older sister as a young girl, Tunnillie learned the art of carving by watching her father make sculptures to sell to fur traders. “Defying gender stereotypes, she became renowned for her autobiographical pieces that rejected aesthetic and social expectations,” says Sara Angel, Founder and Executive Director of the Art Canada Institute.

Tunnillie continued to challenge convention in more ways than one: while her male contemporaries made hunting scenes and shaman’s stories into carvings, she chose to depict emotive works that referenced the ups and downs of her remarkable life.

“Few artists have been able to accomplish the abstraction of pure emotion through cold, hard stone as Tunnillie has,” says Dr. Darlene Coward Wight, author of *Oviloo Tunnillie: Life & Work* and Curator of Inuit Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. “Her subjects are defined by what they feel, not what role they play in society.”

Oviloo Tunnillie: Life & Work can be read on the Art Canada Institute’s website and is available for PDF download.

FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES OR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

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ABOUT THE ART CANADA INSTITUTE

The Art Canada Institute (ACI) is a non-profit research organization based at Massey College, University of Toronto. Its Canadian Online Art Book Project—a program that since 2014 has released over 30 books, all available free of charge in both French and English—publishes on key topics in Canadian art history. The ACI is the only national institution whose mandate is to promote the study of an inclusive, multi-vocal Canadian art history to as broad an audience as possible within Canada and internationally.

IMAGES

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IMAGE CREDITS

[1] Ovilio Tunnillie, *Grieving Woman*, 1997, serpentinite (Tatsituaq), 35 x 12.5 x 11.3 cm, signed with syllabics, Winnipeg Art Gallery. [2] Ovilio Tunnillie, *Nurse with Crying Child*, 2001, serpentinite (Kangiqsuqutaq/Korok Inlet), 25.7 x 15.6 x 9.5 cm, signed with syllabics and dated 2001, collection of John and Joyce Price. [3] Ovilio Tunnillie, *Woman Passed Out*, 1987, serpentinite (Kangiqsuqutaq/Korok Inlet), 48 x 28 x 25 cm, unsigned, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau. [4] Ovilio Tunnillie, 1992, photograph by John Graydon. Courtesy of the Inuit Art Foundation.