

Art and Cold Cash

A conversation between
Patrick Mahon,
Ruby Arngna'naaq,
Sheila Butler,
Jack Butler
and William Noah

In the mid-twentieth century the Canadian federal and territorial governments acted in concert to link Arctic art production to cold cash. At that time, widespread introduction of firearms for hunting, and money to be made by trapping for the fur trade led to increasing dependence on southern commodities for Inuit people. These factors, coupled with the introduction of tuberculosis, brought an end to thousands of years of a nomadic way of life. Settlements were established and formerly nomadic Inuit groups gradually accepted a more sedentary existence, relying far less on hunting and fishing for subsistence. Soon, government arts and crafts production projects were founded in several Arctic communities as interventions intended to provide gainful employment for displaced Inuit. Contacts, mediated by government Crafts Officers, were made with southern art dealers and some Inuit producers became known as artists (in the sense that



The Art and Cold Cash Collective in conversation, Courtesy: Patrick Mahon

the dominant culture uses that term). These artists earned money for the first time and became players in global capitalism as both producers and consumers.

Bringing a North/South view to bear on this history, the “Art and Cold Cash” collective is involved in producing art in a social site in the Canadian Arctic, a contemporary context influenced by imported western notions of art operating in tandem with the



introduction of capitalist exchange. In an investigative mode, Canadian artists Jack Butler, Sheila Butler and Patrick Mahon are working closely with writer Ruby Arngna'naaq and artist William Noah, Inuit members of the collective who have lived through the change from barter economy to capitalism. The work of the "Art and Cold Cash" collective highlights an important contradiction, in that Northern artists are encouraged today, as over the past fifty years, to produce art and to market their own culture as a means of survival, while Southern Canadian artists regularly take jobs to subsidize their practices.

"Art and Cold Cash" seeks to discuss/explore contemporary Inuit art within a context of a politics of interpretation by Southern Canadian cultural workers. It also acknowledges that in the wake of European nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history, art works as commodities occupy troubled ground. As a creative response to these conditions, on 14 December 2004, "Art and Cold Cash" collective members Ruby Arngna'naaq, Jack Butler, Sheila Butler, Patrick Mahon and William Noah sat down to talk about art and money in a conversation that reveals radically different views of notions of monetary and artistic exchange.

PATRICK MAHON: In the contemporary art world, especially in the noncommercial context, capitalism has for a long time been a dirty word. The idea that you would want to make art in order to produce something that someone would want to buy reveals differing relationships between art and money in Northern Canada and Southern Canada. I think our project is intended to open this question up across cultural contexts.

RUBY ARNGNA'NAAQ: I'm not sure I know what you mean when you talk about capitalism.

SHEILA BUTLER: I think of the historical development of money and economy and value in the Western world, resulting in the way we live now with investment and

wage employment and money as the medium of exchange for everything.

RA: I think of capitalism as the Western way that has to do with money and status and achieving power and "power over." From the time I first heard of this project, and in my discussions with you, I thought it wasn't as much about capitalism as it was about culture.

JACK BUTLER: Well, do we make a drawing because we have the need to make a drawing, or do we make the drawing to make the exchange to get the money?

PM: My earlier point was that in some sectors of art-making, certainly in many contexts in Southern Canada, there is the notion that our jobs as artists are to resist the idea that we are actually producing commodities that might have material value in society. And this resistance is seen as part of what defines our aspirations. And you know, I think that philosophically that is a useful position to take up in order to think about the other things we value besides money. At the same time, it's pretty naive to think that somehow as artists we are making objects in the context of a capitalist society that won't enter into that potential system of exchange. Even if nobody wants to buy them, art objects propose the possibility of being bought and sold.

RA: But now, within the Western world, there are groups of people who do not necessarily think of themselves as capitalists, but they find that things have culturally

changed. In other words, there are people who are primarily just using money as opposed to gaining it. They're only using money as a trade thing, because they have no choice. They were born into this contemporary society and money is the means for exchange. But it doesn't necessarily define their life. They are not using it as an end, so if you refer to capitalism only as it is in Southern Canada, that narrows it right down. Before money, for example, another type of trading was done in regard to a shaman's services for healing or bringing back someone's life, or empowering someone. A shaman would receive small pieces to add to his shaman's belt, as symbols of how much he helped. It was not so much an honour as a symbol of appreciation.

WILLIAM NOAH: And if the shaman came to perform, the person who wants the shaman to perform had to give him the best quality little strip of weasel or fox fur. It is the same thing as honouring God. God does not want me to come to you empty-handed. I would have to give money or something that is valuable to me; not all of my money or valuables, but some of it, in order for God to use you to help me. It is the same with the shaman — you do not receive something without giving a little bit of something. It is not exactly an exchange, it is just the way the spirit works. It was more a kind of generosity before money came into use, an offering.

PM: So maybe this is a big jump, but do you think that when people from the Hudson's Bay Company first showed up in the Arctic that the idea of "trade" was automatically embraced by the Inuit? I mean, if, as you say, when people were short of caribou, someone gave them caribou in order that they could survive — but that that exchange was not exactly "trade" — how did the idea take hold?

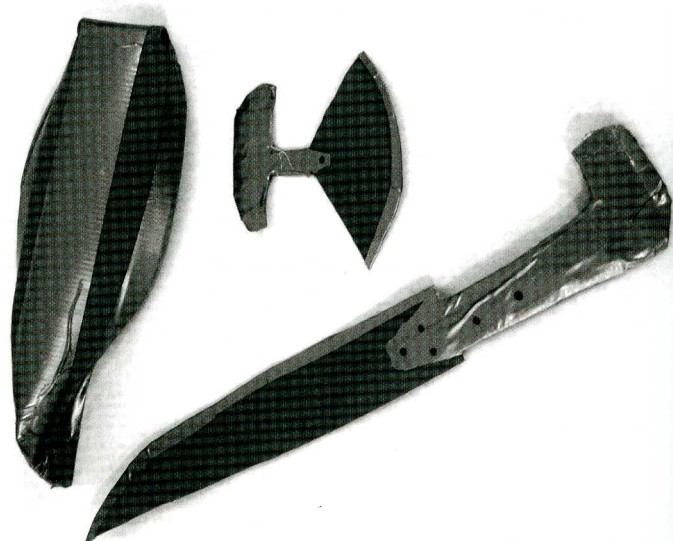
WN: When people were living on the land, we would come to the Hudson's Bay Post once or twice a year when the winter traveling was good. And in the olden days when my father or my grandfather would go to the Hudson's Bay Post to bring some fox or maybe wolf

pelts, and they would put the pelts on the table, then the Hudson's Bay manager would grab some long and short sticks and the length of the sticks would indicate how much you are going to get paid, like five dollars or a dollar and fifty cents. If you want more than the manager is offering, he will take two more sticks and put them on a shelf to let you know that when you come back with more pelts then you will have more sticks, something like a savings account. But if you want to spend your savings right away, the manager will give them all to you at once. But the customer will not be too pleased since he is putting himself in debt. He does not know for sure that he will succeed in getting more furs to cover the sticks he is now spending.

SB: Well, the thing is, when the Hudson's Bay Company built those first trading posts, they knew why they did it — because they wanted the furs. So they expected that when they got there they were going to do some kind of an exchange and they would know that the people who had furs to sell didn't have money and they went there with that in mind.

PM: They must have gone there with the idea that they would need to teach people about the whole idea of capitalism.

RA: Yes, but from my grandfather's point of view, he had a very different interpretation. The fur trading with the Bay was so valuable to him that it would be the same as if today someone gave me an airline ticket to Hawaii. The trade goods made life so much easier in my grandfather's time and it is only later we've discovered



William Noah, *Traditional Tools and Canoe*, plastic from water container, duct tape, Recycling Art Project, A&CC, Baker Lake, 2005, Courtesy: Patrick Mahon

that it really wasn't fair. I remember my grandmother saying that metal implements for skinning or working on caribou meat were a treasure because of what they could do. So you know, whether it came from trade with the Copper Inuit or from the Hudson's Bay Company, it was still a pleasure to have it.

WN: I am still trying to understand what Ruby was saying about capitalism, that it seems to me like the term could be used down south in bigger cities, but I don't know how it can be used up North.

SB: I think that everybody who uses money is part of the capitalist system one way or another.

JB: We are all participating in a money economy.

WN: No, not always, because we Inuit have different tastes.

SB: I understand that you mean that you have a different attitude to the whole thing, but everybody is using money, so that's what we call capitalism. That when you go to buy groceries, or when you want to buy gas for your skidoo, you have to have money to do that, so your attitude may be different than someone's attitude in Toronto, but nevertheless we are all part of the capitalist system. The government issues the money and everybody in Canada uses it.

WN: Well up in the North artwork is very hard to sell to just about anybody. But if you send your art work to southern cities, to art collectors or galleries, you have a much better chance to sell one or two almost right away. Because of unemployment it's very hard in the North and things cost so much that people don't have enough money to buy art. Even if they really like it, they cannot afford it. It is a pretty hard life in the North, but down South I think people have more money.

PM: But I'm thinking that not everybody understands money in the same way. What you are saying, William, suggests the idea that people are thinking about money

differently in the North. And I would say that in the South there are also people who think about money quite differently from one another. The people who buy art, I would argue, think about money in a different way from those who are below the poverty line, who live very "hand-to-mouth" as we would say — and they probably don't think about money that differently from a lot of people in the North.

WN: For Inuit up North, we do like to have people's art work, but we are not as crazy about it as people down South are, because Inuit art is nothing new to us, and it has something to do with our small population too. The whole population of Nunavut could go into one arena like the Air Canada Centre.

SB: Even down South, the percentage of people who buy art is really very small and I would say that the people who buy Inuit art are usually not the same people who buy art made by Southern Canadians. It's usually two different groups of people. There is a market and galleries and buyers and the public who are interested in contemporary Canadian work and then there is a separate market and galleries and buyers for Inuit work.

PM: Yes, as I said before, in the contemporary art world capitalism tends to be a dirty word, or at least a very fraught one. The accepted idea that Inuit artists make art primarily to produce commodities for purchase distances them from the mainstream of Canadian contemporary art. Certainly the idea of a single motivation for the complexities of human creativity is laughable, but nonetheless we've developed some rather "essentialist" views about what compels producers in the North and the South in Canada.

SB: The Inuit are living Canadians and I believe that their growth as artists would benefit from critical analysis from a position of current theoretical relevance, but this doesn't usually happen. For instance, most Canadian art magazines, including FUSE, don't normally cover Inuit art shows. The great distance

between North and South and the language barrier are big impediments. For Inuit artists, it's as if time stopped with the last generation and younger people who never lived on the land are restricted to a marginal audience that expects a style of art that was innovative in the mid-twentieth century and is now referred to down South as contemporary Inuit art.

PM: It strikes me that it follows that somebody who is already in the mainstream system also has increased access to the system of cultural funding. It takes being part of the system oftentimes to actually get your hands on money, in order to do things that aren't supposedly involved directly in income generation. Like the amount of education people have about money often helps them to know how to get more.

JB: There are other kinds of value in this as well, such as intellectual value. What are the ideas that are most valuable to people; what are they actually prepared to trade in order to get access to aesthetic ideas? In this project we're trying to look around the edge of what we think is really the important idea. We want to use art to look at the idea of value in art.

PM: Recently I was at a meeting of an artist-run centre advisory group and we were talking about trying to get some corporate support, but we realized that it is sometimes hard to convince artists in Southern Canada to go to bed with business, as it were. You know, the concept is still pretty suspect in certain sectors of the visual arts, and yet there are a lot of creative corporate people who would like to give money to interesting projects. I think the whole spectrum in relation to the arts and money is shifting a lot in Canada. But to be truly cynical about it, the not-for-profit system is still set up to get all the sort of "needy" people to try to eat each other. I do think that the smart people in the arts try to resist that trap, mind you.

RA: What is art, then? Because where I live in an area geared to low incomes in Ottawa, many people don't think that they have the need to buy "real art," so they

will buy "made in China" items.

SB: Reproductions.

RA: Yes, reproductions. Then there are others like me who live hand-to-mouth, but because you like something so much you are going to pay a little at a time to buy it, because of the value of what you see.

JB: We started this whole project with the consideration of what happens when we have money to pay for people to make art. And we're all now making art as a medium through which we can think about these issues. In "Art and Cold Cash," I think art is going to constantly change its role but it's going to play a part in everything we do. We're making art to consider the nature of art and money and culture. I know that when Sheila and I first went to Baker Lake in 1969 we were introducing both art and capitalism, but it took years to figure out the relationship between what we thought we were doing, and the value that was put on it.

RA: And at that time I was asking myself, "What the heck do I need to do?" And the big question for the Department of Indian Affairs was, "What do we do with these Inuit? We can't just have them in this state forever, right?"

JB: So what do you think the feds wanted you to do?

RA: They wanted us (especially my generation) off welfare. Isn't that what they wanted to do?

SB: Yes, I think you're right. That's my understanding.

JB: They wanted you off welfare but they didn't want you out of money and home. They wanted Inuit to make something that would be worth money.

RA: Yes, to get off their aid and earn a living.

JB: And Indian Affairs had seen it work in Cape Dorset and money came in from making carvings and prints and

things, and the idea was, let's try this somewhere else.

SB: Well above all, when we first went to Baker Lake, we just loved the work. We knew how good it was when we saw it. And then to have the luxury of sitting down and hearing people actually talk about what it represented and why they made it was so valuable to me. That insight into another lifestyle, another sense of values, was one of the greatest gifts I have ever had in my life.

WN: At that same time we were having a spiritual revival in Baker Lake in 1970–71. Before that, I applied to work in the Co-op shop, trying to file bone and antler, but the place was so gloomy that I just didn't want to work there. Then you guys came to Baker and started our art creation, talking to people, encouraging them to do some artwork. It has something to do with what was happening to the community as a whole. Some people were happy and some were unhappy but it has something to do with your mentality or your spirit or your mind or your strength or the way you communicate to people. Back then, it was right after coming through a time of starvation and we were just learning to socialize in small community life and learning to communicate with *kabloona* [white people] and other Inuit.

JB: But it seems to me that at that time, the sculptures were selling well so some people did not have to be on welfare. And the work was of such extraordinary quality that it gave the Inuit a voice, and an expression outside the community in the world. The work really contained a new kind of vision.

SB: Well I don't think "new" is the word. It was very old, but it was their own vision.

JB: With the funding we got for this project, it looks like institutions, universities and granting agencies are for the first time supporting art making as viable research, with recognition and respect by the academy. Since we are among the people to do the first projects, I think

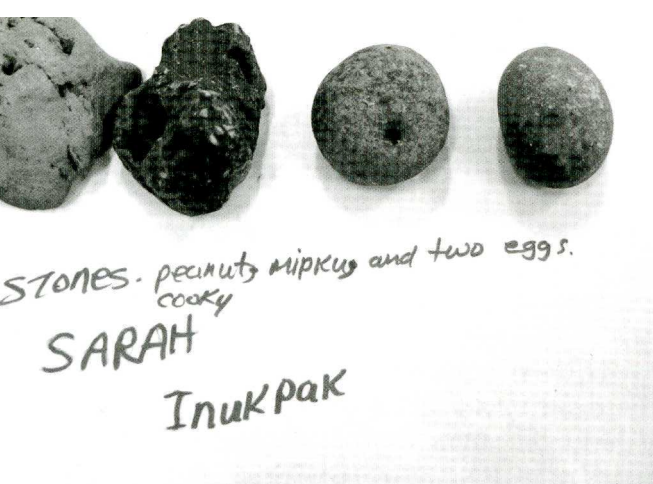
that FUSE's question about the power dynamics of this project is an interesting one. We do work collaboratively here, yet we all have our roles in this. Patrick is chair of a university department, and Sheila's just retired from the university, but the rest of us represent links to other communities which makes it possible to use the funding to make art for the benefit of people in a variety of communities who want access to it.

PM: And you could argue optimistically that we might not have got the grant if it hadn't involved the five of us. The fact that we applied with all five of us as collaborators makes me feel optimistic, meaning that they funded a project that clearly moves well beyond the university as its community. It's not that we are merely trying to do something to expand the knowledge base within the university. Clearly, if that happens that is great, but you know, we are really trying to do something that will have value and consequences in a much broader context.

JB: This was a collaborative venture from the start, putting together who would do what, and how we would do it, with the decision to make drawings because we are all people who value drawing. But the decision that we would use video just sort of developed. I had no idea that we would all be behind the camera and in front of the camera and that the quality involved in the generation of these ideas and images would be shared so well. It was great discovering this when we put the video together with videographer Jeremy Drummond.

RA: They asked us to talk about power dynamics and we also agreed to talk about our work on the languages. And what was "ethnography" again? The study of cultures?

SB: It's the study of living peoples, like when they talk about "anthropology," that could be people who lived thousands of years ago and you study their culture and their language and all that. And "ethnology" means when you study people who are still living today.



Sarah Inukpak, *Rocks*, peanut butter cookie, dried caribou and two eggs, Recycling Art Project, A&CC, Baker Lake, 2005, Courtesy: Patrick Mahon

terms of the cultural mentality that would allow it, it's interesting. You might say our usage of a word can be "relational," in the way that relations between people are determined partly on the basis of the situations they find themselves in. There is interest in that word — relational — in the art world right now. Rather than thinking of art as a thing that is sort of fixed, it's about a recognition of an exchange between a viewer and whatever is there to be viewed, and between the artist and the experience.

SB: You mean the viewer gets to play a bigger role?

JB: I thought it was interesting when we talked about language translations and Inuktitut words that have "aki" as a root, and words that are based on the idea of value.

PM: Yeah, and the artwork represents a living exchange rather than acting as a kind of frozen commodity. Earlier on, Jack mentioned something about how we are using art to think about these issues, and you know even this discussion has an element of art in it because we are trying to figure something out, so it is a bit like translation in that way.

RA: Well it started as a communications issue because the people that we were going to interview were not necessarily bilingual, so it became a way of making sure that they understood exactly what we were coming for, and what this research is about to a degree. Because if they didn't understand, then there was the danger of people thinking the Butlers are going to start something over again that happened twenty years ago, as opposed to what we are trying to do here. Because the Inuit language is a very precise language and the English language is so slippery, you know?

RA: It is, because research has finally started to open up. For research in the old academic way, you would remove yourself. I mean, between human beings there is no such thing as removing yourself. You are already influenced by someone. There is already some kind of memory in you. Intelligent people became a little more intelligent and turned around and said, "Maybe research can be subjective, and maybe it is all subjective."

JB: You said when you translate the word "expensive," that the Inuktitut word refers to "cost price" and also to "revenge."

PM: That's the kind of thinking that allows this art project to be supported under a label that calls what we are doing "research."

RA: Yes, it could also mean "revenge" — a pay back kind of deal and the root word is basically the same. And in Inuktitut, "precious" more often refers to a relationship, or a value between two people, as opposed to a physical object.

JB: You talked about Inuit value systems prior to the introduction of money but we haven't talked about what art was in Baker Lake prior to our introducing prints and drawings under the name of art. We both got the idea of what we wanted to do right away and we moved right in to make it work out. The idea was brought in by the government even before we got there that we were going to make art, that you guys were going to make art.

PM: In English we use the word "value" and we talk about money or we can be talking about something that is very intangible, and yet we are using the same word. That connection has to come from somewhere obviously, in the history of the language, but even in

RA: And that's different, because you know, if you're an Inuk you're an artist!

JB: What did you think of that?

RA: I don't know but I certainly said, "Get real!"

JB: William, you're an artist and you had a mother who was a very famous artist. Was there some connection between the influence of your mother and how you became an artist?

WN: I don't know, it may be in the family, but no matter what our nationality, our mother has the power to destroy or to object; her love is so strong that the mother will sacrifice and love them and look after them from the beginning until their death. Since the day I was born I learned from my mother wisdom, advice; advice that is still with me even though she was gone about twenty or thirty years ago. I will not be able to lift up a pencil if I refuse my mother's advice.

PM: Do you remember, when you were growing up, your mother or other women making visual things, like decorative things?

SB: They always put decorative touches to the garments, like the clothing wasn't constructed only to survive the cold. There were always beautiful decorative designs and aesthetic treatment that was way more work to do, and yet it was done because it was so beautiful.



Simon Tookoome, *Recycling Sculptures*, Recycling Art Project, A&CC, Baker Lake, 2005. Courtesy: Patrick Mahon

RA: Yeah, the sewers were to show off subtlety without being an exhibitionist. Subtlety was important you know. There was the recognition of having a skill or being able to create something out of pleasure to some degree. There is something that our parents taught us and we can teach our children, how to have the greatest gumption to get up and go, to open up their chances, not to avoid a risk factor as a kind of confidence booster. They one time told me that art is something you are not necessarily born with, but it's often a way of perception. There are people who could very easily become wonderful great artists, but they refused because somewhere in themselves they said, "No, I am not an artist." So it's like value as opposed to price.

PM: I really think you do have to have something you have to say, that has some value beyond yourself, whether it be for your family or for your community. You don't have to be an egomaniac to think that your work could be a vehicle for communication. It's always interesting when you are teaching students, some of them say, "Well, I could never do this," and others act like they are the genius of the century. And in some ways it's like what William was talking about: the sense of connectedness in the case of what he was saying about his mother.

RA: So where does that start then? Where does the value of art start? — and back to the question to William, "How did you start?" Really it starts with the openness, the idea that "ok, I can do this," but then, at the beginning you don't really know.

PM: I'm interested in knowing, when the Baker Lake Co-op was first starting, whether it seemed to everybody that there were certain people who were better artists than others. I mean if everybody recognized who was a better sewer or a hunter, did everybody recognize who was a better artist?

WN: Well if you have a good heart you will be a good community member, a good counselor, a good preacher. There are some people who do real art, not

just the work, but giving it out to everybody and it is automatically giving life, doing a good deed. Like someone told a story about when he was a little boy and his grandfather spotted some caribou walking far away, going fast. Because they needed meat the grandfather advised the boy not to drop the rifle, but to run until he gets to the far hill near the animals. He also sadly tells the boy how tired the boy will feel in fifteen minutes or a half hour of running. Just by obedience the boy started running. Soon he could feel the saliva; he could breathe but with a cough and a little bit of drool. But then it opened up and now he can run and run, just exactly the way the grandfather advised him, and he shot the part of the animal the grandfather advised. So the boy did what he wanted to do by obedience to a wiser, more knowledgeable man. I think it's the same thing all round. If you don't take advice, then what are you going to be?

SB: And you think that it is those kind of people who also became the good artists. Is that what you mean?

WN: Not just good artists; good fishermen, good hunters, good singers too.

SB: Just generally capable people.

WN: If you are injured you don't feel like singing. But if you love somebody, the word comes out and it is easy to do; it is enough to make you do a thing successfully.



Ian Amarook and Bobby Tagoona, *Drum set*, Recycling Art Project, A&CC, Baker Lake, 2005, Courtesy: Patrick Mahon

JB: I'm thinking about Anguhadluq who started drawing when he was about seventy years old. He didn't know if the drawings were art or not, but he knew he made them. And someone said to me, "Well he was a great hunter," and this was the explanation of why he, of course, made great drawings.

PM: You can see that in lots of young artists; it is not always the ones who have great drawing talent, for example, but it is the ones that are committed and focused and have a kind of vision. I mean, it still is ultimately about a vision, and not about genius. It is something that you know because of love or desire, or whatever. I think that idea is fairly common and it is not culturally specific. A lot of what we are talking about is that way, but with some significant variations across cultures.

Ruby Arngna'naaq, an Inuk from Baker Lake, Nunavut, now resides in Ottawa. She helped to found the Sanavik Inuit Cooperative in Baker Lake in 1970. She co-produced "Inuit Myths and Legends" and co-directed "Ikajurti: Midwifery in the Canadian Arctic" for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) and contributed to "The First Minister's Conference on Aboriginal Rights and Justice Issues."

Sheila Butler is an artist/teacher who exhibits in Canada and abroad, including recently in Rotterdam. She was an early member of Mentoring Artists for Women's Art in Winnipeg. In 1989 Butler joined the Visual Arts faculty at the University of Western Ontario, teaching courses in studio production and contemporary theory and criticism.

Jack Butler's internationally exhibited work links visual art and medical science in video projections and computer animations based on his experience as a medical model builder and published researcher in human development. He is a founding member of Sanavik Inuit Cooperative, Baker Lake, Nunavut. As an adjunct to his art practice, Butler is a licensed personal financial representative.

Patrick Mahon is an artist/teacher who exhibits work that reveals how art gains "currency" in cultural contexts. Employed in the 1980's as an elementary school teacher in the Canadian Arctic, Mahon is now Chair of Visual Arts at the University of Western Ontario where he contributes extensive knowledge of cultural theory. Mahon is represented by Leo Kamen Gallery (Toronto).

William Noah was born near the Back River, moving to the settlement of Baker Lake in 1958. Encouraged by his mother to draw, and now exhibiting internationally, Noah's work reflects the progressive Westernization of Baker Lake. He has been elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories, the Nunavut Planning Commission and as Mayor of Baker Lake.