

Tarralik Duffy on Myra Kukiiyaut's *Evil Spirits* (1971)

In Myra Kukiiyaut's evocative composition *Evil Spirits* (1971) we are given a glimpse into a wonderfully peculiar world. The central figure appears to be a woman who has caught two spirits by their tongues. For me, it calls to mind a parent or school master of old holding misbehaving children by their ears, walking swiftly along as she corrects them. The creature beneath is snapping and snarling at their feet but she remains coolly in charge.

The form of a bird-man with clawed toes and a spade tongue curiously shares the same yellow pattern on his winged parka as the woman's amauti. This matching pop of colour is subtly strange, as it suggests a familial tie between the two—that these garments were made by the same seamstress. His right wing blends in with her akuq as she holds his tongue and the tongue of the two-headed bird-spirit to her right.

The somewhat comical bird-spirit also shares the same pattern on its wing as the woman and although she seems to hold its tongue a bit more gingerly, she keeps a wary, peripheral eye on them all.

In comparison to Kenojuak Ashevak's famously rounded and equidistant depictions, which invite us softly into her enchanted realms, Kukiiyaut's pen is sharper and more pointed, hinting at a more menacing world; tangled forms, claws and limbs grasping and reaching, mouths agape with sharp teeth, plunging and hoping for a taste of flesh.

Just as Kukiiyaut's lines are snarling and entangled, so are the realms of anguish and anxiety. This piece might suggest a woman wrestling with her demons, but the universe of spiritual beings that surround Inuit and share our land, sea and sky is very real. I vividly remember the whispering of ijirait as a child, during recess or after school visits, when the adults were still busy at work. There were often stories about so-and-so, who was still an angakkuk and could turn into a caribou or a rabbit.

The scariest stories were always shared while out camping, greatly amplified by the glorious and at times terrifying vastness of the landscape around us. Many of these mysterious beings could only be observed by the eyes of an angakkuq, who had the power to journey to other realms in trances and dreams. For the rest of us they only exist in uneasy whispers, but sometimes chance encounters with regular people happen. It was always that chance that kept us cautious, lest we tempt the spirits, inviting them into our lives with foolish acts or careless speaking.

Although many of our stories portray a terrifying and gloomy world filled with non-human life forms, some of these forms are helping spirits, and others are not much different from Inuit except they cannot be seen. As I look closer at the woman's own monstrously clawed hands, I wonder: is she in charge of them because she is in fact an evil spirit herself? Are the monsters physical beings, or simply extensions of her own dark thoughts? Is she in a struggle to remove them in haste before they completely overtake her? Has she done this before? In this fantastically weird scene, Kukiiyaut's colourful sense of play and mysticism is evident. The evil spirits are in her control, at least for now.

Tarralik Duffy is a writer, multidisciplinary artist and designer from Salliq (Coral Harbour), NU. Much of her visual work centres on contemporary Inuit culture; her fine jewellery line Ugly Fish regularly appears in fashion events and gallery shops across Canada. She is the winner of the 2021 Kenojuak Ashevak Memorial Award.

This essay was originally published in Inuit Art Quarterly (35.2) as "Choice: Myra Kukiiyaut." It has been reprinted with permission of the author.