

Erica Donovan

Arctic Shades

Erica Donovan an emerging Inuvialuk (1) artist from Tuktoyaktuk (2) takes inspiration from land and skies to fashion beautiful earrings. Growing up in a small community, a large family of strong talented women surrounded Erica. Crafting and creating are traditions that have been passed down through generations of women in her family. Her grandmother was a well-known seamstress and her aunts have gained that same respect. Erica and her cousins grew up playing in her grandmother's sewing room, learning, and developing different skills. Erica planned to pursue art, but until she adulthood, she had no clear idea how to pursue that path.

Due to abuse in her childhood home, Erica lashed out and rebelled at an early age. Her decisions started leading her down a destructive path, and her parents decided it was best to remove her from the community. After moving to Regina, Saskatchewan to finish high school, she moved back to Tuktoyaktuk at age eighteen to live with her grandfather. His life teachings of values, morals and entrepreneurial skills are all things Erica gained from him. Tragically, at twenty-two years old she lost her younger brother, and this turned her world upside down. While struggling with alcohol abuse and grieving for her brother, she found out she was pregnant. This forced her to deal with her grief, to sober up and



take accountability for her life. Erica could not understand how her healthy brother could have died, and his death became the reason she decided to start living.

As a young mother she started creating again. Art became a meditative outlet during some dark times. In the arctic Erica was surrounded by crafts necessary to

Nordic survival. She and her family would sew mitts, hats, parkas and anything else they needed to keep them warm through the winter. They would also adorn all their outerwear with colourful beadwork. Immersing herself in motherhood, she reconnected with the peace and happiness that her family's traditional craft making brought. Being able to ex-

press herself through imagination and art is such an important part of Erica's life, one that has shaped her into the woman she is today.

“I always felt I was an artist, from the moment I was put on the Earth.”

In 2016, Erica attended the Great Northern Art festival (3) and took a workshop on brick stitching (4). With a talent for colour matching, she decided to start a business. Erica founded She was a Free

Spirit (5) later that year. While building her brand, it was important for her to honour where she came from. The first imagery she used for marketing was a picture of her grandfather's boat that was named after her mother. Her earrings have colours of the land, of the skies as well as from pop culture. Erica sees the world in colours but signs her work in black and white. Incorporating black and white into her pieces represents the Inuvialuit dancing parkas she admired at ceremonies growing up. Erica has created a couple different series including the Mix and Match series, the Seal Skin series and the Tuktoyaktuk Skies series. As well, she has also recently partnered with Diamonds de Canada (6) to create special diamond pieces for her collection. With an emphasis on culture, Erica wants people

acknowledge and appreciate the history behind her art as well as the art itself.

In 2018, Erica was invited to the first Indigenous fashion week in Toronto. Being surrounded by likeminded individuals was an emotional experience. With such dark histories surrounding her community, Erica finds it empowering to interact with those who are working towards a better future. Erica hopes that she can encourage people to push past their own trauma and move forward, as she has done in her life. A monumental moment in Erica's career was in 2021 when she signed a contract with Simons, Canada (7). This meant that her products were going to be sold on their website, and she would make them to order. Attaining this level of international exposure was a huge career accomplishment. On top of that success Erica went on to win the Fabric 1840 award from Simons in 2022 and won \$10,000 for her earrings Tuktoyaktuk Skies. These earrings are based on a beautiful photo taken by Chris Kelly of the vibrant sky in Erica's hometown. Recently in February 2023, Erica participated in Milan Fashion Week (8). She and six other artists were the first Indigenous group to attend the prestigious event White Milano (9) and have their art featured.

Erica is well known for her gorgeous earrings; however, she considers herself an interdisciplinary artist. Alongside beading, she paints, sculpts and sews. After recently losing her mother, Erica has inherited generations' worth of sewing patterns and has plans to eventually start creating



parkas. While being a mother and working full time as the finance manager for Parks Canada, Erica tries to leave her weekends available for creating in her home studio. Currently, Erica is taking the summer off to spend time with her family and focus on self-healing. She hopes to eventually see her jewellery in Hollywood, and even one day to be worn by a celebrity such as Jenifer Lopez. Erica is a strong, independent Inuvialuk woman whose art has flourished through her resilience. With her strong work ethic, Erica strives to educate people on the value of Indigenous art and the positivity it spreads.

Based on an interview with Ayshani Aurora in 2023

References:

1. "The Inuvialuit (sing. Inuvialuk; the real people) or Western Canadian Inuit are Inuit who live in the western Canadian Arctic region.

Wikimedia Foundation. (2023b, June 14). Inuvialuit. Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inuvialuit>

2. Tuktoyaktuk/Tuk-tu-yaaq-tuuq or short version "Tuk" (Inuvialuktun: resembling a caribou), is an Inuvialuit Hamlet of about 965 people which is located on the shores of the Arctic Ocean at the tip of the Northwest Territories.

Tuktoyaktuk. (n.d.). <https://tuktoyaktuk.ca/>

3. "The Great Northern Arts Festival (GNAF) is the only pan-northern arts festival in Canada and has been uniting art makers with art lovers for over 30 years.

Great Northern Arts Festival. Inuvik. (n.d.). <https://www.inuvik.ca/en/getting-active/Great-Northern-Arts-Festival.asp>

4. "In brick stitch, each row of beads is offset one-half bead from the bead on the previous row. The pattern resembles the way bricks are stacked to make a wall."

VanBenschoten, J. (n.d.). Jennifer VanBenschoten, beading expert for the Spruce Crafts. The Spruce Crafts. <https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/jennifer-vanbenschoten-4705330>

5. She was a free spirit. She Was A Free Spirit. (2023, March 10). <https://shewasafreespirit.com/>

6. Diamonds de Canada. (n.d.). Diamonds de Canada. <https://diamondsdecanada.com/>

7. La Maison Simons, commonly known as Simons, is a fashion retailer in Canada, headquartered in Quebec City, Quebec.

Wikimedia Foundation. (2023b, May 30). La Maison Simons. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Maison_Simons

8. "Milan Fashion Week presents around 70 fashion shows and 90 presentations of designers to an international audience, through hosting catwalk shows, designer showrooms and static presentations."

Milan Fashion week. FashionUnited. (n.d.). <https://fashionunited.com/landing/milan-fashion-week>

9. "White Milano is a large fair where the new trends in womenswear and accessories for the upcoming seasons become the protagonists."

White Milano. Canton Fair net. (n.d.). <https://www.cantonfair.net/event/3501-white-milano>

Image Source: CBC, "Tuktoyaktuk beader won't stop until she sees J.Lo in her earrings," 2022

