

**R.M. Vaughan: The Exhibitionist**

## **Northern Russian artists make tracks**

**From Saturday's Globe and Mail**

**Published Friday, Sep. 23, 2011 5:00PM EDT**

**Last updated Friday, Sep. 23, 2011 5:08PM EDT**

**Days of Sakha-Yakutia at Bezpala Brown Gallery**

*Sept. 30-Oct. 9; Oct. 15-30, 17 Church St., Toronto; [bezpala.com](http://bezpala.com)*



Arctic Playground by Evgenia Arbugaeva

Yakutia, or the Sakha Republic, is a semi-autonomous republic in the far northeastern corner of Russia (in the area that was once generally referred to as Siberia). It supports a population of about a million people, or, just under a fifth of the population of the GTA, and yet is nearly the size of India.

And, no, I'd never heard of it before either.

But a new exhibition of Sakha art, opening this week at Bezpala Brown Gallery, makes me wonder why Yakutia is not better represented on the so-called "circumpolar" art map. Circumpolar art is all the rage these days, with art from Canada, Iceland and the Scandinavian

countries criss-crossing gallery and art-fair circuits around the globe. Maybe Yakutia just needs a better PR agent?

Featuring works by 10 artists of varied North Russian aboriginal heritage – the Sakha people share a complex, internationally mingled (ties extend to China and northern Canada), animism-inspired culture that predates Russian occupation by 400 years – the exhibition is part of both Culture Days and of a month-long celebration entitled Days of Sakha-Yakutia Culture in Toronto, which features everything from art to reindeer burgers.

Gallery director Mila Bezpala-Brown, who is of Ukrainian heritage, describes the task of curating an exhibition of works by artists from a geographically and psychologically distant (very distant) place as “not as challenging as you would think.”

“With people from the old parts of the USSR, everything works on personal connections,” she says. “We attended the New York Art Expo and we met some artists there, and through them we met Yakutia’s trade commissioner to Canada, who is also an art collector and lives outside of Toronto, and from there all kinds of expatriate community connections fell into place.”

Bezpala draws a link between Yakutia’s social issues and those of Canada’s North: “concerns about the environment, about cultures disappearing, about poverty and economic development of resources, and who will control that development. Yakutia is remote, but not so remote too.”

“I was surprised by how much the Sakha people share with Canadian aboriginal people, especially the Inuit,” chimes in Bezpala Brown’s Fariz Kovalchuk (himself an Azerbaijani expat), “but not only in terms of social issues, but very much in terms of how the art looks, and functions in the community.”

Indeed, visitors to the Days of Sakha show will be forgiven if, at first, they mistake the art for Inuit or northern Canadian works.

Mikhail Starostin’s paintings, for instance, depict a people perpetually swathed in bundled layers of bulky clothing and/or a far more swaddling, if not swallowing, landscape. His figures dance, play jumping games, (and, incongruously, carry citrus fruit), across monochromatic, near-blank terrains.

Images of vacancy and absence, of empty, featureless spaces, are so prevalent in Starostin’s work that one could read these absences as a kind of weighted negative presence; negative not in an oppressive sense, but negative as in a keen awareness of lack – lack of trees, lack of plants, lack of buildings, houses, people.

Meanwhile, Evgenia Arbugaeva’s vivid photography conveys a world overrun by snow, a world where human attempts to create distinctive environments (brightly coloured homes, junk yard saunas, Sputnik-era playgrounds) are always defeated by natural forces.

People are presented as intruders in Arbugaeva’s images: pesky and indomitable, yes, but really little more than blips on an otherwise snowy screen. Like Starostin, however, Arbugaeva does

not read the erasure she captures as anti-human, but rather as a core, defining reality of Yakutian life – to be Yakutian is to recognize one’s secondary-to-nature status.

All that’s missing from Days of Sakha, a rich exhibition and rare glimpse into a little known culture, is a few bottles of kumis – “milk beer” made from mare’s milk.



Bathhouse by Evgenia Arbugaeva