



# Polar-Perfect-Past-A-Roid

BY LORI-ANN BELLISSIMO

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**Lori-Ann Bellissimo is a painter who maintains studios in Toronto and Devon, UK. After successful solo and group exhibitions and residencies in southeast Asia and Italy, she took up residence in the Devon and Cornwall region of the United Kingdom. She also has collaborated with architects and designers on many interior projects around the globe. Her work can be seen at [cartissi.wixsite.com/loriannbellissimo](http://cartissi.wixsite.com/loriannbellissimo).**

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I am a Canadian artist, born to innovative Italian immigrants who immigrated to Canada after the extremely devastating effects of war in Italy. My parents have always been grateful to Canada for all it offered them and our family. Perhaps that's why I chose to see as much of the country as possible before travelling elsewhere.

To date, I've lived in both Asia and Italy, among the places where my art career has taken me. I feel like I am a citizen of the world. While majoring in visual art at the Claude Watson School for the Arts at Earl Haig Secondary School in Toronto, I hitchhiked through parts of eastern Canada back when it felt safe for me and my friends to do so. A summer hitch out to St. Pierre and Langlade, off the coast of Newfoundland, had included dinner with a strange religious sect courtesy of a newly retired fireman; my first ecological shampoo given to me by a posh man in a red convertible with wavy hair like cirrus clouds; and many nights spent in the plush-lined cabs of generous semi-trailer truckers while the driver slept in the local Motel 6. I even recall driving alongside a moose whose head was level with mine, only to be told it was a baby.

Hitching led to further exploration of Canada the summer before I started university at York, where I was about to major in fine art with advanced standing to third-year studio courses on scholarship. It started when Air Canada offered a flight anywhere in Canada for \$125 as part of its celebration of the 125th anniversary of Confederation. The flight that took you the farthest was to Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay), so that's what got you your money's worth! The flight was full of miners who took notice of my long hair standing on end the further north we got.

It was on this trip to Baffin Island that I experienced a sense of space unlike anything I'd experienced before. The landscape was muted though bright with nearly 24 hours of sunlight, yet I was freezing, and the tent had blown away. An Inuit man called Harry in Arctic Bay let me and a few other travellers sleep in the unfinished frame of what was to be a small backpacker rental for visitors, the first of its kind in the area. Harry's family took me to meet the matriarchal grandma of the family, and she taught me to stretch seal skins and showed me how to make bannock (fried bread) on a campfire. She also served as the night watcher on a weekend seal hunt and yelled "Nunuk" (polar bear) when one was spotted tracking us on the icy water. That weekend Harry's wife Lydia lent me a beautiful, embroidered baby blue coat to wear. It was on the trip that some members of Susan Aglukark's family (or so they claimed) played her music. The unique landscape of the region and the generosity of the Inuit community made a deep impression on me and filled me with a greater understanding of the local way of life.

This trip taught me a sense of being alone that felt good, one that would enable me to grow as a painter in my studio . . . it was my ears covered with headphones and my yellow Sony Walkman playing the likes of "My Lovin' (You're Never Gonna Get It)" by En Vogue that got me through a run-in with a pack of sled dogs tied up but threatening nonetheless.

In September 1992, I looked back to my Arctic experiences to create a set of charcoal drawings, which later developed into the Polaroid series about my northern experiences.

In 1993, I returned from a foreign exchange to the United Kingdom and met George Manupelli (1931–2014) in the fine art studios. He was playing the guitar one day and I noticed it was a Woody Guthrie song . . . we got on like a house on fire, as it were, and he wasn't even my teacher yet. As my teacher, George taught me so much as he truly listened to what I had to say even if he wasn't always convinced. I will always feel indebted to York University for placing me in his presence. He wasn't just the founder of the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1963, but will always be a dear friend whose artwork is hanging on the wall in front of me as I write this. George taught me how to undo the artspeak that existed in so many classes. George had a significant impact on me as a student and as an occasional teacher myself, by demonstrating the importance of active listening and open-mindedness in the learning process.

It was sometime after that when George introduced me to his unique alchemy-induced technique using light and other secrets, which developed into the series used for the mural. When a student competition came about, I entered it and was awarded the funds to make *Polar-Perfect-Past-A-Roid* (1995). It toured Canada and as far away as Australia that year. It was originally installed in the Canadian Studies Department at York University.

I produced the Polaroids referencing a beautiful woman I spent time with as she carried one child on her back and I bonded with her little girl Amy. I blew the small treasures up to as large a scale as I could using what were then considered "cutting-edge electrographic printing methods." I had grown up in a family-run printing business and had access to the widest archival printer on the market. My father still regales people with the story of the technical side of the production. It seemed logical to document my experiences with the Indigenous peoples of Arctic Bay, Baffin Island, through photographs and journal entries in mural form. I tried to emulate the Polaroid landscape with a thick white band across the bottom where the chemicals usually sit in a packet. And the glossy paper evokes the film effect. I gave the mural a playful title, *Polar-Perfect-Past-A-Roid*. By blending elements of my Italian roots with wordplay related to "pasta" and "the past," I infused a little humour into the mural.

Photos of the trip that inspired the piece can be seen below and at <https://www.instagram.com/loriannbellissimo/> ■





