

# WANDA KOOP



**W A N D A K O O P**

JANUARY 26 TO MARCH 10, 1991

SOUTHERN ALBERTA ART GALLERY



Southern Alberta Art Gallery  
Wanda Koop  
January 26 to March 10, 1991

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Wanda Koop's work is represented in Toronto by the Drabinsky Gallery

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We thought it would be interesting to provide two points of view regarding Wanda Koop's work. It was our good fortune that Els Hoek, Amsterdam curator and critic, and Andy Patton, Toronto painter and writer, both agreed to contribute essays. Els Hoek's introduction provides a glimpse of a Canadian artist through European eyes while Andy Patton's essay offers a poetic assessment of one painter's work by another. We thank them both for their enlightening observations.

Our gallery continues to rely upon Charles Cousins in Calgary for his consummate design skills and ability to create order out of chaos. His patience is commendable and most appreciated. Finally, we are indebted to The Canada Council, Exhibition Assistance program, for their support of Wanda Koop's exhibition and this publication.

Joan Stebbins  
*Director/ Curator*





## PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Els Hoek

translated from the Dutch by Wendie Shafer, Amsterdam

20 February 1990. Your whole body shrivels in the cold of Winnipeg's winter. Your arms—which you have just been stretching out in an attempt to grasp the panels painted by Wanda Koop—creep back inside the sleeves of the jacket that's supposed to be windproof. Head and shoulders attempt a unification. A few moments before, in the dramatic heat inside Koop's studio, their separation seemed quite convincing. But outside—jaws clenched, eyes glued to the ground, all warmth dives deep into the body's depths.

Of course it is nonsense to attempt an analysis of Wanda Koop's work based on the climatological conditions of her working environment. If you try to do so you find yourself faced with the familiar dichotomy of diagonally contradictory paths:





there is the parallel (cold weather means cool work, rational, reserved, small and muted) and there is the contrast (this means hot work, emotional, expressive, expansive, dynamic). Both are dead-end roads. Not only because a concept such as 'cool', 'large' or 'static' is in itself devoid of meaning (a large blue car beside a small red one; both are travelling at 140 km per hour and thus they appear to each other to be standing still) but also because such a concept soon dulls our perception of other, albeit winding, nevertheless intriguing, courses.

Winter in Winnipeg is everything but an incidental circumstance; it is an experience. This experience of the bitter cold has links with Koop's work. Just as street life shifts during the winter months into the shopping mall, just as the blood streams from the cheeks of those who venture outside—in the same way the thoughts, the energy, and certainly the adventurous spirit of the artist, withdraw and turn inwards. Say that winter in Canada lasts a hundred-and-sixty days. During those days Wanda Koop stays in her studio and dives fathoms below sea-level. In her work she travels to the moon and afterwards there are still enough days over to permit a journey round the world.

The panels, each one half a painting, stand in regimental order. During my visit on 20 February they are carried out by the dozen and forged into one before my eyes. A left and a right half, together forming 'Self Portrait' (Veil of Veronica). The next pair: 'Native Fires'. When the imprint of Christ's face on the one side is flanked by the flames of Indian fires springing up in the darkness and on the other side by the circular 'Mandela' it suddenly seems as if we are no longer dealing with independent images. A triptych? That is going too far. The first thought, that the key to this work lies in the divided hand of the artist, that is, in the differences between subject, colour, form, style and manner of painting, has to compete from this moment on with the pursuit of a secret connection.

The flames of the Indian fires are stifled by a dying swan ('Swan'), to be followed by a giant pink orchid ('Cattelya Orchid and One Brazilian Hummingbird') which in turn disappears behind a mask of lines on a patchwork of colours entitled 'Face'. Meanwhile panels are pushed in front of the paintings of Christ and 'Mandela': a male torso, a baby, a shell.

The visitor to the exhibition of Koop's paintings in the Southern Alberta Art Gallery will see these works. Probably in different groupings than those described



here. The viewer will understand straight away that all I have done here is to propose the beginning of a game of Happy Families that in theory has no end. In February, Koop completed the first of the atmospheric paintings such as 'Tracking Station', 'Untitled (Orange)', and 'Untitled (Green)'. Now that these, beside the more recognizable signs, have become part of the game, the possible permutations are endless and endlessly complex.

The expression 'Happy Families' may sound a little denigrating. And the image—as if it is an exhibition of huge playing cards in the Southern Alberta Art Gallery—is only partially applicable. The different elements of the quartet (or quintet, sextet, or octet) are after all never irrevocable. And neither the artist nor the studio guest nor the exhibition visitor can ever call themselves the winner of the game.

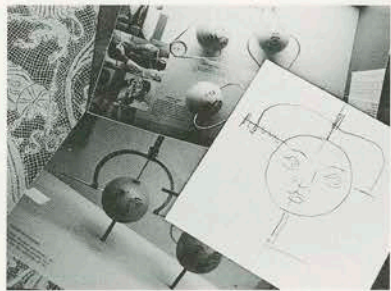
Perhaps it is better to think in terms of a film. To consider the work as if it were a treasure chest of as yet unedited lengths of celluloid. This makes it clear that the traditional idea of the autonomous painting (and therefore the associated esthetic criteria) can happily be allowed to go by the board. Furthermore, the viewer, instead of being placed at the mercy of a trump card, is addressed in the capacity of editor and producer.

Everyone makes their own epic. Everyone creates their own reality. And the pictures Wanda Koop offers ensure that the various realities are not purely based on personal whims; that they are automatically linked to actual experiences. When an artist paints the veil of Veronica and intimates in the title that there is some kind of identification, you might perhaps speak of personal iconography. The veil as painting? The painting as imprint? Art as redemption?

The combination of 'Self Portrait' with the orchid suggests ideas connected with gender and sexuality. Some people will make the link between suffering and seduction and immediately interpret it in terms of a contemporary social question, whether that be the legal position of women or the controversial matter of the Aids virus. And someone else will follow the road of Art; both saviour and femme fatale. Positioned between 'Native Fires' and 'Mandela' the features of Christ become charged with politico-religious meaning.

I don't intend to discuss further the work I saw in February 1990. This is only one, and then only the beginning, of the many possible accounts of Wanda Koop's painting. In the meantime Koop has completed at least a dozen paintings in a style





that I described above as 'atmospheric'. They are also works in two parts, they have the same measurements and the same shape as those already mentioned, but in place of a 'scene' that can be described and named they show a curtain of colour, many shades, many hues. Dull and bright, faint and violent, soft, hard, often cruelly biting. There are clouds, there are mists, the surface is diffuse, it drips, it sometimes weeps. The splendour of the colour in these paintings is only interrupted by monochrome line patterns that have a figurative nature. You see a skyline and it is as if concrete is scorched onto steel beams. Plants and human figures resemble fossils: no flesh, no greenery. These paintings too tell of the involvement of the artist in matters that transcend the personal or *l'art pour l'art* approach; yet they are not simply illustrations accompanying a newspaper article.

Hands thrust deep into pockets, shoulders hunched to ears, eyes turned earthwards. After an encounter with the art of Wanda Koop, those who turn their eyes inwards will surely discover that it is Beauty that both makes and breaks.







## PORTRET VAN EEN KUNSTENAAR

Els Hoek

20 Februari 1990. In de sneeuw van Winnipeg krimpt je hele lichaam ineen. Armen die zich zojuist rekten om de panelen van Wanda Koop te kunnen omvatten, kruipen terug in de mouwen van het als winddicht gekochte jack. Hoofd en schouders doen pogingen om een te worden. Net nog, in het vuur van het spel in Koops atelier, leek hun scheiding onafwendbaar. Maar buiten—kaken op elkaar, ogen gelooen naar de grond. Ook het kleinste bloedvat graaft zich diep in de huid.

Onzin natuurlijk om het karakter van het werk van Wanda Koop te willen herleiden tot de klimatologische omstandigheden in de plaats waar het onstaat. Probeer het, en je belandt op de bekende tweesprong van haaks op elkaar staande wegen: de parallel (koud dus koel, rationeel, ingetogen, klein, verstild) of het contrast





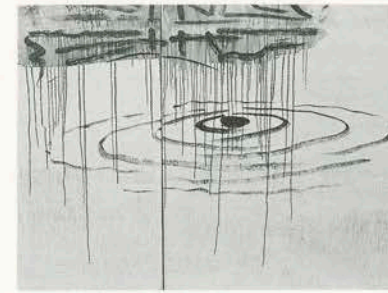
(koud dus heet, emotioneel, expressief, groot, dynamisch). Beide wegen lopen dood. Niet alleen omdat een begrip als koel, groot of statisch op zichzelf niets zegt (een grote blauwe auto naast een kleine rode; beide rijden 140 km per uur en staan stil ten opzichte van elkaar), maar ook omdat zo'n aanduiding al snel het zicht beneemt op andere, misschien wat kronkelige, maar spannende paden.

Alleen, winter in Winnipeg is allesbehalve een omstandigheid; het is een ervaring. Als ervaring houdt de bittere kou verband met het werk van Koop. Zoals het straatleven zich tijdens de winter verplaatst naar de shopping mall, zoals het bloed zich terugtrekt uit de wangen van de argeloze wandelaar—zo keren de gedachten, de energie, en zeker ook de reislust van de kunstenaar zich naar binnen. Zeg dat de Canadese winter honderdzesig dagen duurt. In deze periode duikt Wanda Koop in haar atelier aan Albert Street mijlen onder de zeespiegel. Ze reist al schilderend naar de maan, en dan nog blijven er genoeg dagen over om een trip rond de wereld te maken.

De panelen, halve schilderijen, staan achter elkaar in het gelid. In de loop van mijn bezoek van 20 Februari worden er dozijnen naar het midden getild en voor het oog aan elkaar gesmeed. Een linker en een rechterhelft, samen *Self Portrait (Veil of Veronica)*. Een volgend koppel: *Native Fires*. Wanneer de afdruk van Christus aan de ene kant geflankeerd wordt door in het donker oploaiende indianenvuren en, aan de andere kant, door de cirkelvorm Mandela, lijkt het plotseling niet meer om op zich zelf staande beelden te gaan. Een triptiek? Dat is te sterk uitgedrukt. De eerste gedachte, namelijk dat de sleutel tot het werk ligt in de gespleten hand van de kunstenaar, dat wil zeggen in de verschillen in onderwerp, kleur, vorm, stijl en schilderwijze, moet vanaf dit moment echter wedijveren met de speurtocht naar een onderhuidse band.

De indianenvuren worden afgedekt door een stervende zwaan (*Swan*), daarop een reusachtige roze orchidee (*Cattelya Orchid and One Brazilian Hummingbird*), die op haar beurt verdwijnt achter een lijnenmasker op een patchwork van kleuren getiteld *Face*. Ondertussen zijn er ook panelen voor de Christus en Mandela geschoven: een mannetors, een baby, een schelp.

De bezoeker van Koops tentoonstelling in the Southern Alberta Art Gallery zal deze werken tegenkomen. Vermoedelijk in weer andere dan de beschreven constellaties. Hij of zij zal ook meteen begrijpen dat ik hier alleen nog maar het begin



heb aangegeven van een in principe eindeloos kwartetspel. In Februari had Koop net de eerste van de atmosferische schilderijen voltooid, zoals *Tracking Station, Untitled (Orange)*, *Untitled (Green)*. Nu deze, naast de meer herkenbare tekens, in het spel kunnen worden betrokken zijn de mogelijke verbanden eindeloos en eindeloos complex.

"Kwartetspel" klinkt niet erg eerbiedig. En de beeldspraak, al zou het in de Southern Alberta Art Gallery gaan om een tentoonstelling van speelkaarten—welliswaar met een oppervlak van enkele vierkante meters—gaat ook maar ten dele op. De samenstelling van het kwartet (of quintet, sextet, octet) ligt immers niet vast. En noch de kunstenaar, noch de gast in het atelier, noch de bezoeker van de tentoonstelling kan zich ooit winnaar noemen.

Misschien is het beter om te denken in termen van film. Het werk te beschouwen als een schat aan (nog) niet gemonteerd beeldmateriaal. Zo wordt duidelijk dat het traditionele idee van het autonome schilderij (en dus ook de bijbehorende esthetische criteria) met een gerust hart kan worden losgelaten. Bovendien wordt de kijker, in plaats van overgeleverd aan een troef, aangesproken op zijn of haar kwaliteiten als regisseur en redacteur.

Ieder maakt zijn eigen epos. Ieder maakt zijn eigen werkelijkheid. En de beelden die Wanda Koop aandraagt zorgen ervoor dat de verschillende realiteiten niet puur individueel of willekeurig zijn; dat ze automatisch gekoppeld zijn aan reële ervaringen. Wanneer een kunstenaar de sluier van Veronica schildert en in de titel van het werk aangeeft dat er sprake is van een vorm van identificatie, zou je nog kunnen spreken van een persoonlijke iconografie. De sluier als schilderij? Het schilderen als een doordrukproces? De kunst als verlossing?

De combinatie van *Self Portrait* met de orchidee leidt de gedachten naar kwesties van sexe en sexualiteit. De een zal zo'n de koppeling van leiden en verleiding direct interpreteren in het licht van een actuele maatschappelijke problematiek—of dat nu de rechtspositie van de vrouw is, of de veile bloem van het Aidsvirus. De ander zal doorwandelen op het pad van de kunst: verlosser en femme fatale. Tussen *Native Fires* en *Mandela* krijgt het gelaat van Christus een politiek-religieuze lading.

Het is niet de bedoeling om de montage van Februari hier verder voor te spelen. Het is slechts een, en dan nog alleen het begin, van de vele mogelijke verhalen in het werk van Wanda Koop. Daar komt bij dat Koop inmiddels nog zeker een dozijn





schilderijen heeft voltooid in een trant die ik hierboven heb omschreven als "atmosferisch". Het zijn eveneens tweedelige werken, ze hebben dezelfde afmetingen en hetzelfde formaat als de reeds genoemde, maar in plaats van een benoembaar "plaatje" tonen ze gordijnen van kleur, allerlei kleuren. Somber en licht, pastel en fel, zacht, hard, vaak gemeen-bijtend. Er zijn wolken, nevels, het oppervlak is diffuus, druipt, huilt ook soms. De kleurpracht van deze schilderijen wordt alleen doorbroken door monochrome lijnconstructies met een figuratief karakter. Zie je een skyline dan is het alsof het beton op de staalbalken is verzengd. Planten en mensfiguren zijn als fossielen: geen vlees, geen bladgroen. Ook uit deze schilderijen spreekt betrokkenheid van de kunstenaar bij zaken die het persoonlijke en een *l'art pour l'art* houding overstijgen, zonder dat ze gelezen kunnen worden als een praatje bij een (kranten) praatje.

Handen in de zakken, schouders naar de oren, ogen naar de tenen. Wie na de ontmoeting met de kunst van Wanda Koop de blik naar binnen richt moet wel ontdekken dat het de Schoonheid is die maakt en breekt.





# NO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD<sup>1</sup>

Andy Patton

"Objects are simple. They are named  
By simple signs. They are only named.  
Signs are their representatives.  
We can only speak about them,  
Cannot put them into words. In language  
We can only state the how of things,  
Not what they are."<sup>2</sup>

I worked in Jasper the summer of that year. I used to sit on the bank where in a broad curve the Athabaska River hurried gurgling and bending over stones: its busy, perpetual, unthinking music. I believed that if I could just listen carefully enough or intensely enough, I would at last be able to hear it *speak*. I strained after its voice all summer long, but it never spoke. Rivers don't; but that summer my delusion was real.

In conversations over the years, in the studio or in greasy spoons, Koop has often said that she thinks of her paintings as being like a series of words<sup>3</sup> that you could string together in various sequences to make different sentences and different meanings. How an artist thinks of her work doesn't have to be accurate; it is only a tool that helps in making the work. Only part description, it is partly an amature.

- 1 Du Fu, from the poem, "Sorrow at the End of the Canal".
- 2 Jan Zwicky, from Wittgenstein Elegies.
- 3 "The apartment's dumb as paper/it emptied by itself/Sounds start slithering/through the radiator". (Osip Mandelstam).



But I can't see Koop's paintings as being like words. When I stand in front of them, and stare—long past the point at which everything that can be seen *has* been seen—they silence language and meaning, and since I still return to those paintings, this must be part of their value.

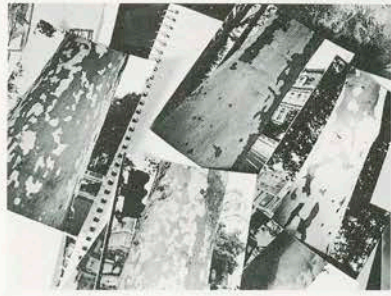
But a catalogue essay is expected to say what artworks *mean*. We demand their translation into language. And yet I'm not sure that all artworks have meaning in that sense: that they contain ideas, sayable things this side of silence. "Tree", "orchid", "insect head", "baby" . . . And if they don't, maybe that blankness terrifies us into interpretation. Maybe, at best, at most, Koop's painting of a shell only names some shell: a fictional one, or one in the world. In words we can only name her painting of a shell, and never, finally, put *it* into words. Perhaps because it escapes us, because it escapes language, our prejudice is to insist it "say" something: an idea, a moral, a proposition about the world. Perhaps the value of artworks—material things that aren't made entirely of language—is that they cannot be put entirely into words. "We can only speak *about* them." Perhaps somewhere we recognize this<sup>4</sup>, however faintly, and see once more that the world resists language, and is not replaced.

We usually interpret a figurative artwork through what is depicted there, as though in this act of recognition what the work *is* were laid bare. As though it were a seashell, an insect's head, the thick bark of a plane tree. René Payant, the late Québécois critic<sup>5</sup>, once wrote somewhere that what's important in a work is less what's represented than how the work intensifies itself.<sup>6</sup> If we can only state the how of things, not what they are, this is a way of starting.

Even in photographs certain things are clear. Even artificially clear: the photographs I work from can only show the image of her work—but not their larger than body-size scale, and not the way the paint flowed with its own specific rate over the expanses of plywood that still peek through here and there along the fringes of the painting, or the chalky slightly mournful colour that always strikes me as having overcome some huge greyness that preceded it. Photography and memory<sup>7</sup> are forms of forgetting, ways of dumping information. And what survives this process—at-a-distance of writing and remembering is not Koop's work, but my image of it: it is her imagery that survives. Here, then, perhaps, in the imagery, is the paintings' way of intensifying themselves.

- 4 "And though one sees how far the unhappiness has gone, though one wills it to cease, it is like water, and flows, without true shape, and one is powerless". (Kim Maltman).
- 5 "Time gnaws at me like a coin/and there's not enough of me left for myself". (Osip Mandelstam).
- 6 "the flash that crystallizes/trees and walls, surprising them in that/instant of eternity". (Eugenio Montale).
- 7 "So, too, a dark remembering sense,/ even before it fastens onto images and words,/reveals the uninhabited void/we once occupied, the emptiness biding its time/to fill itself once again with us, and find us out again . . .". (Eugenio Montale).





Her imagery becomes itself through specific conditions—which condense it through the peculiar pressure they exert: centred composition, the isolation of the image, and the use of extreme close-up views. But these are not mechanical “devices” or “strategies” installed in the paintings—they are occurrences, they are habits of thought and feeling. In the paintings they occur together; it is only language, or thought, that divide them from each other.

“Centred composition”—what I want to point out is simply that Koop habitually places the image in the centre<sup>8</sup> of the painting (The only real exception to this is “Monkey and Child”). This centering of depicted things is a compositional decision which is intricately tied into the surfaces Koop paints on. All the eighteen pieces in this group are painted on plywood, which comes in standard sheets four feet by eight feet. Two sheets placed together will make a square eight feet by eight feet—the format used for all these works. What is interesting about a square is that it seems to get rid of composition—or more accurately, it neutralizes it, since neither the support’s height or its length call attention to itself. This neutrality of format begins to rid the painting, from the start, of certain narrativel suggestions.<sup>9</sup> A tall rectangle calls attention to its verticality, already begins to suggest, perhaps, a standing human figure<sup>10</sup>, or some glimmer of transcendence. A long narrow rectangle already contains the beginning of a view, a landscape, perhaps a dead Christ. The other thing about squares is that, since they tend to neutralize composition, things are often forced toward the centre—the point which becomes most salient because of its equidistance from every corner and every side.

I want to point out one other formal structure. Since the supports on which she paints are always made up of two plywood sheets, there’s a vertical seam between them, which is always visible and therefore has to be taken into account. And this seam doesn’t occur vaguely “somewhere” in the picture; it always divides the painting in half vertically. Unavoidable and emphatic, it has its own gravitational pull, tugs each object into the centre of our vision. It is difficult to spell out exactly what the effect of this always-centred imagery is, but perhaps this will do: it demonstrates a specific form of control which is not “natural” (for lack of a better word). In the world of our daily lives, things occur wherever they occur; they are not placed for us. We are not at the centre of the world: we see something out of the corner of our eye, in the grey of our peripheral vision. Or someone passes from left to right and disappears. Something is obscured by something else.

8 “From here the city appears a chalky fortress, incandescent against thunder-bearing skies which admit, now and then, briefly, beams whose apparent purpose is to cauterize excessive beauty from the grass and then move on”. (Roo Borson).

9 “They vanish and recur, circuitous, like paths one wanders on or loses, following the fields”. (Roo Borson).

10 “Through all its existence the body is a house aflame”. (Ikkyū).



So this very simple habit of composition that Koop returns to again and again, distinguishes her paintings from the world, from the sense of paintings being windows through which we can view the world. Things are placed for us, and unobscured. They are centred on us. Her paintings, then, are fictions, possible worlds. Perhaps the gesture her insistent composition makes signals toward some chance simply to see for a moment, unoccluded by sight’s real contingencies.<sup>11</sup>

We only know the world under a description. I don’t know whether to say that Koop’s paintings are evidence of a desire to break past all descriptions, or whether they are an attempt to construct a slower, more careful, point-to-point description in competition with others—but undistracted, ideal. Looking and yearning are collapsed into each other; in these paintings they are inextricable.

And there’s something else to this centering: everything faces us. A target, the radar dish of a tracking station, a huge torso, the trunk of a plane tree, Christ’s face on a veil, a grasshopper’s head, an orchid, the high arched windows of a cathedral, a monkey and her child. All things, beings or objects, turn towards us. Even the huge baby’s face, one of the few images set at an angle to us, watches us. I want to say<sup>12</sup>: “a universe of beings and things suspicious of us”.

This strange aspect, of things facing or “regarding” us, is something inherent in all painting, a social and material possibility that Koop amplifies in her own work. Sheldon Nodelman pointed this out in *Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality*.

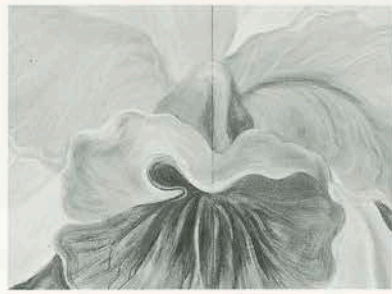
“With the repertory of his customary behaviour and motives drastically contracted, the viewer is made to face and regard the work, which reciprocally faces and appears to regard him . . . Attention and action are directed *forward* from this “face” or “front”, while the realms to the back and sides are largely ignored. In this sense the planar display of the graphic notational system, centred on and distributed transversely to the axis of vision and motion, closely parallels the human focusing of attention to the *front* . . . This act of *display*, thrusting the picture forward for the attention of any potential viewer, suffuses its whole character; . . . it proclaims itself thereby the vehicle of a human address . . .”

If this act of display is part of painting’s potential, what is important here is just to realize how much Koop makes use of it, by bringing every subject of every painting toward us. If most painters consciously or unconsciously are dependent on this, few

11 “The years rise over my shoulders/in swarms. It wasn’t in vain; this is the work/each accomplishes alone and all together, the living and the dead, to enter the obscure world”. (Mario Luzi).

12 “The truest things, if spoken/here, would sound like nonsense”. (Erin Mouré).





return to it so repeatedly. Fewer still bother to turn every depicted thing until it is aligned with the axis of our vision, so that this anthropomorphic experience of a painting which “faces” us and “regards” us surfaces in each depiction.

Koop's imagery is further intensified through the use of extreme close-up views. It's no accident that in calling this aspect a “close-up”, I have had to rely on a term from photography's domain. Whether or not her imagery comes directly from photographs or not—and I don't think it does—the mentality that structures them is one which is thoroughly conditioned by the existence of photography and the possibilities it offers.

The discovery of the camera's ability to move in so close to an object must have been shocking. Perhaps it's too much a part of our world of habits for us to ever recover much sense of that now, but it's clear that this motion into the object, expanding it so that it dominates our entire field of vision, intensifies our relation to the image. Think of Koop's painting of the seashell.<sup>13</sup> It's easy to imagine the same object in a corner of traditional still-life. It might be exquisite, or intimate, or humble, or charming. But it's hard to imagine it could ever have the same impact as it does at this large scale, or that it could make the same demands on a viewer.

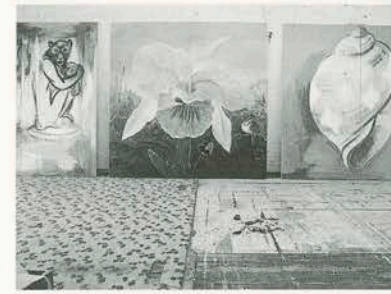
And this is part of it: the extreme close-up, particularly on this huge almost cinematic scale, makes entirely different demands of a viewer than did the traditional still-life. That genre presented objects in concert with each other. They drew meaning from each other. Usually the scale of the depicted objects within the paintings was small-ish: a consoling display of things which lay at our service.<sup>14</sup> In Koop's paintings each object appears to us in isolation. Meaning—or its absence—comes out of that isolation.

The objects in Koop's paintings are not at our service. A shell so large it could never be picked up in a hand, or held to the ear. A huge baby's head with a monstrous eye. But I shouldn't overdraw this aspect, this over-sizing. The torso in “Olympian” for example, is huge, but the “Tree of Life”<sup>15</sup> is only tree-sized or less. The “Waterfall”, or the section of it shown in the painting, would be small by nature's scale. A plane tree could be the scale it appears in the painting. So scale—not the actual size of the paintings, which does not vary—inflects each depicted object differently. What does not change is this close-up view, and that the object appears in its isolation. What does not vary—regardless of the size in real life of what is depicted—is the size of

13 “A snail flows gracefully through the grass, a ship riding the wavelets of its own rippling flesh, but so slowly, it might as well be the broken ornamental head of a fallen column”. (Roo Borson).

14 “perhaps/some amulet, preserves you/some keepsake beside your lipstick/powder puff, or file: a white mouse, of ivory. And so you exist!” (Eugenio Montale).

15 “Too/torn is the human wood, too dull/that year to year voice”. (Eugenio Montale).



Koop's depiction. Orchid, swan, shell, waterfall, baby's head, torso, plane tree, all make their appearance so large in size that they begin to fill the space, and squeeze out the possibility of anything else appearing.

Perhaps her paintings are images of a universe we are not at the centre of. The technologies that have allowed us to capture the world and bring all things so close,<sup>16</sup> are the same technologies that have shown us the expanse of the universe, its scale so far beyond our common sense that we may be estranged forever.<sup>17</sup>

It may be that this estrangement has something to do with the specific way in which Koop uses imagery. In these paintings at least, I think that her way has something in common with how certain poets use imagery. And certainly her images seem to function in a fashion similar to how Bakhtin, the great Russian literary scholar, described poetry.

“... the poet strips off the word of others' intentions, he<sup>18</sup> uses only such words and forms (and only in such a way) that they lose their link with concrete intentional levels of language and their specific contexts. Behind the words of a poetic work one should not sense any typical or reified images of genres (except for the given poetic genre), nor professions, tendencies, directions... nor world views (except for the unitary and singular world view of the poet himself), nor typical and individual images of speaking persons, their speech mannerisms or typical intonations. *Everything that enters the work must immerse itself in Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts...*”

Take “Waterfall” for example—nothing is shown of its context, what lies above, below, at the sides, imaginable rocks, river, trees along the banks. What appears is only a pillar of light in darkness,<sup>19</sup> something whose identity is given us only by the title, and so draws us away from the easy recognition of things we think of as constituting “meaning”.

Bakhtin saw this stripping away of context as something which flawed poetry so deeply it could not recover. His allegiances lay elsewhere—with all that prose could accomplish. But I want to use his passage simply as a description, one which may or may not be true of how poetry functions, but is useful for me in sorting out Koop's way of handling imagery. To present things—words, images—out of context is politically suspect, since, as Bakhtin said, this strips them of the whole social world from which they come. Yet the value of poetry—and of Koop's work to my mind—

16 “To mean a thing is to go up to it”. (Jan Zwicky).

17 “I've lost my way in the sky—now where?” (Osip Mandelstam).

18 “You're him, you think you're you”. (Eugenio Montale).

19 “With the plunge through death's vortex/will light's great chute suddenly spread over his head?” (Tomas Transtomer)





can only be that through this process of stripping away, words and images can be used in ways which are no longer constrained by their earlier contexts, tendencies, directions, world views. An image, a word, might lie for a moment outside the usual conventions by which its meanings were assigned. No work which shows us not only the object—a shell, let's say, a plane tree—but its context as well, can possibly suggest what these same objects might be like when they come to dominate our whole field of vision, broken away from the usual contexts that subordinate them to us.<sup>20</sup> Only if it is possible for us to take an image and “to forget its previous life in any other contexts” can we see the world through a sudden angle, in its estrangement from us.

I hope I'm not rehearsing that old chestnut that we live in a fragmented world. What I see in Koop's work is not fragmentation (where is there any visible indication of it?) but the solitude, or silence, of things. Solitude:<sup>21</sup> everything appears alone. Silence: they do not speak to us, or to each other. Her paintings are a procession of huge and isolated objects we cannot *know* any longer.<sup>22</sup>

The danger of this type of writing—mine, that is, this long exposition—is that I cannot help convincing myself that I *know*; that I know the paintings, and cannot help replacing them by my ideas about them (“Ideation reigns supreme in language” said Edward Sapir, the linguist). Working in this medium of words, I cannot help but foster the illusion that the work itself contains ideas, and that this writing simply extracts them, like some precious ore mined from the quartzite seam.

We want to know what an artwork means—“what does it say?”<sup>23</sup> I don't think that every artwork does “say.” When we're asked for the meaning of a poem for example, what we produce is a paraphrase of it, a translation from the English into the English, and in so doing, we rid ourselves of the poem and replace it with different words. Language remains, all that disappears<sup>24</sup> is the poem. In the case of a painting, what we want is words to replace the sensuous material object. We act as though the words, the interpretations, are what is finally important, as though they were the real essence of the work. I think that what we really want is not the work, but the consolation of some grand and universal truth about ourselves and the world. But if that is what constitutes meaning, then to allow ourselves to be arrested by an image, to dwell there and to not to think—even for a moment—is to threaten to let meaning collapse. Imagery, or fascination is what we must defend ourselves against. But the meaning of the work must be how it is actually experienced. The whole sequence

- 20 “What I'm saying now isn't said by me./It's dug out of the ground like grains of petrified wheat”. (Osip Mandelstam).
- 21 “People with feeling must shed tears”. (Du Fu).
- 22 “As though the sum total of human knowledge were there, while we sleep”. (Roo Borson).
- 23 “It says the soul does not exist,/that there is nothing to diminish pain/or pleasure,/or to give it permanence”. (Kim Maltman).
- 24 “The neighbourhood you thought you'd lost/fills with a brief dust of diamonds”. (George Amabile).



of stops and starts, thoughts and blank moments, the intensity of images that arrest our flow through the text or halt it or let it dissolve. A space or image in the text where, for a moment, we are unable or unwilling to think, to construe, could be part of its meaning.

The “Shell” for instance, does it “say” something? Does it inform us of the physical processes, say, by which shells form? Is the evolution of this species laid out for us? Does it say something about the ecological problems that haunt us now? Is the shell a symbol of something larger? Or does the painting *do* something else, is *it* something different than we dared to imagine:<sup>25</sup> an intensity, a resistance to thought and language, a form of silence?

I do not think it says anything to us. It only appears,<sup>26</sup> and we say about it.

I admire what the literary critic Jonathon Cullers said, about writing and its relation to interpretation—which he calls “naturalization”: our way of possessing the work through the operations of meaning, of containing it within the limits of our own thought.

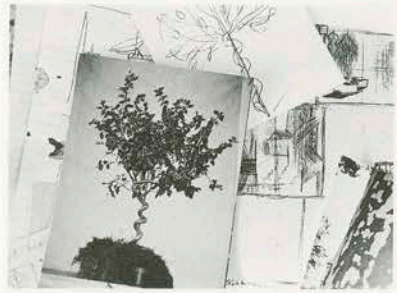
“What the writer must do is to create a text which continually makes us aware of the cost at which we naturalize, which flaunts the difference between verbal surface and naturalizing interpretation so that we see how much richer and less banal the former is than the latter . . . The poet or novelist succeeds in challenging naturalization not by going beyond the bounds of sense but by creating a verbal surface whose fascination is greater than that of any possible naturalization and which thereby challenges the models by which we attempt to comprehend and circumscribe it”.

Perhaps this too is a kind of silence. Perhaps every artwork whose surface fascinates silences by comparison the critical texts that surround it, stills for a moment the ceaseless production of meaning which is Western culture. That silence is necessary, now, when our critical writing more and more overpowers the artworks it means to articulate, and breeds the illusion that everything can be said, or known. We are stripping the world of its qualities. All these paintings do is give us a chance to look—stalled, in an intense and fictional space, where all the painting's qualities are applied to each thing that is depicted.<sup>27</sup>

The qualities of this long discursive essay are exactly opposite to the condensation and intensity of the paintings. What the paintings *are* for me, evaporates<sup>28</sup> in every

- 25 “Who dares go with you to your deadfall/ see the years wrinkling up the reservoir./watch the ivy turning a wash of blood/on your infirmary wall?” (Robert Lowell).
- 26 “What we have seen is what the world acquires/from the strangeness of the way we see”. (Jan Zwicky).
- 27 “And here the uproar I came with/already transmuted stumbles an instant and then/ breaks loose from a great sleep/and another landscape swirls and passes”. (Vittorio Sereni).
- 28 “Your names/fit loosely and you slide/ between the letters, too fine/for this ordinary mesh”. (Don McKay).





sentence. Another essay could have been only two lines long:

Wanda Koop's paintings are a form of mourning for the lost qualities of a sea shell held too close.<sup>29</sup>

29 "My sorrow rises high  
as Zhongnan  
Mountain/Too great  
to be swept aside".  
(Du Fu).

## P L A T E S





UNTITLED (VEIL OF VERONICA), 1989, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD

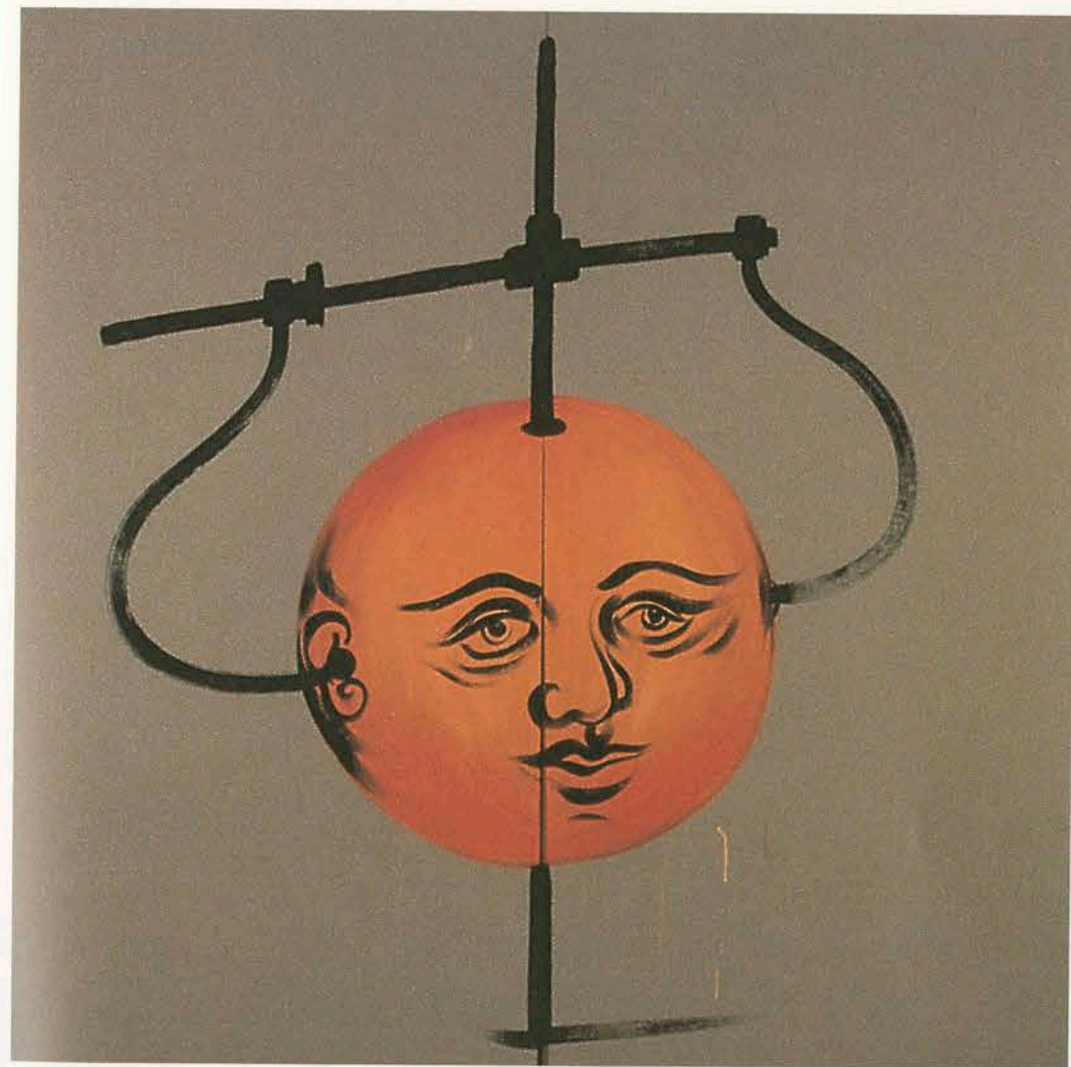


UNTITLED (BABY), 1989, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD



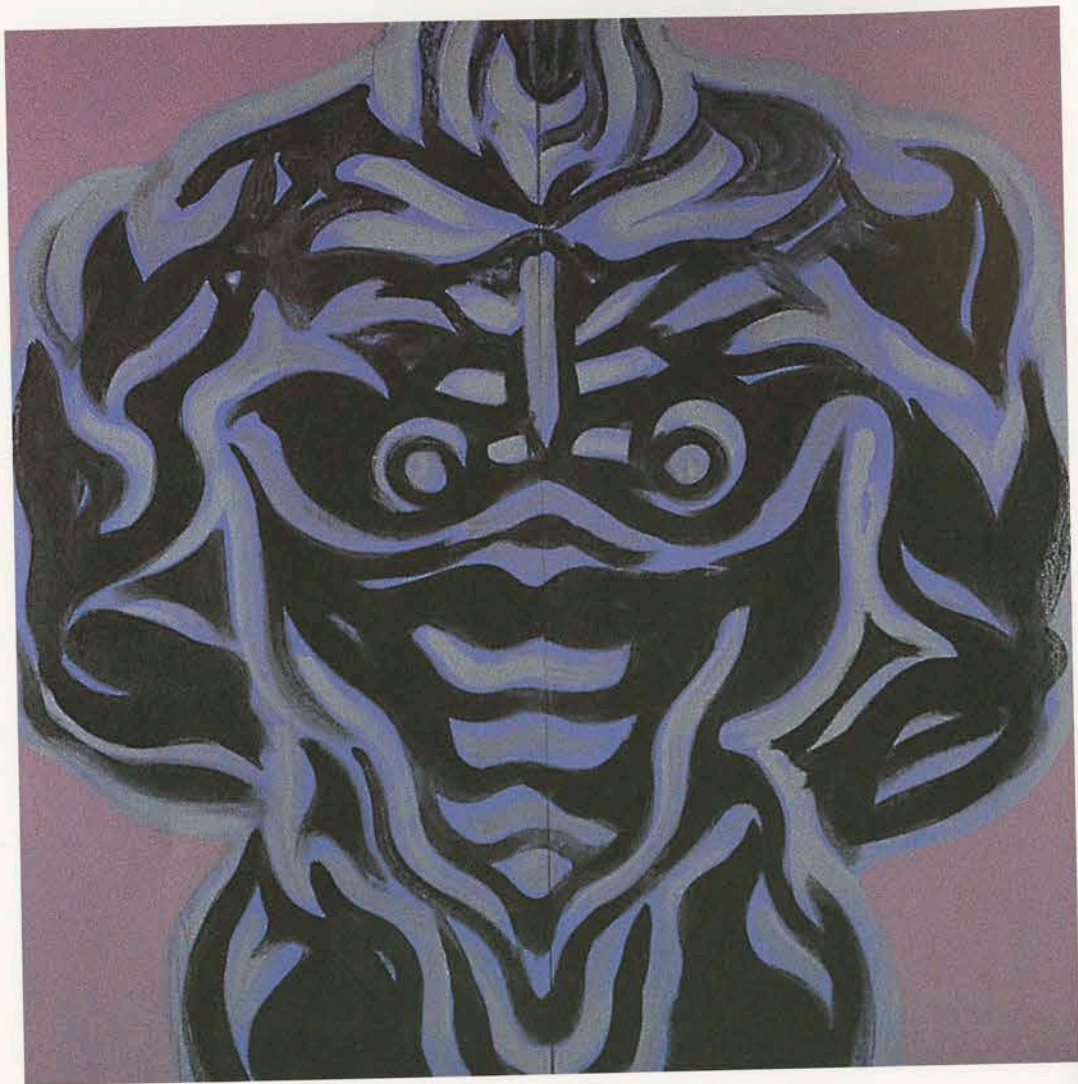


UNTITLED (SHELL), 1990, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD



UNTITLED (HEAD SPANNER), 1990, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD



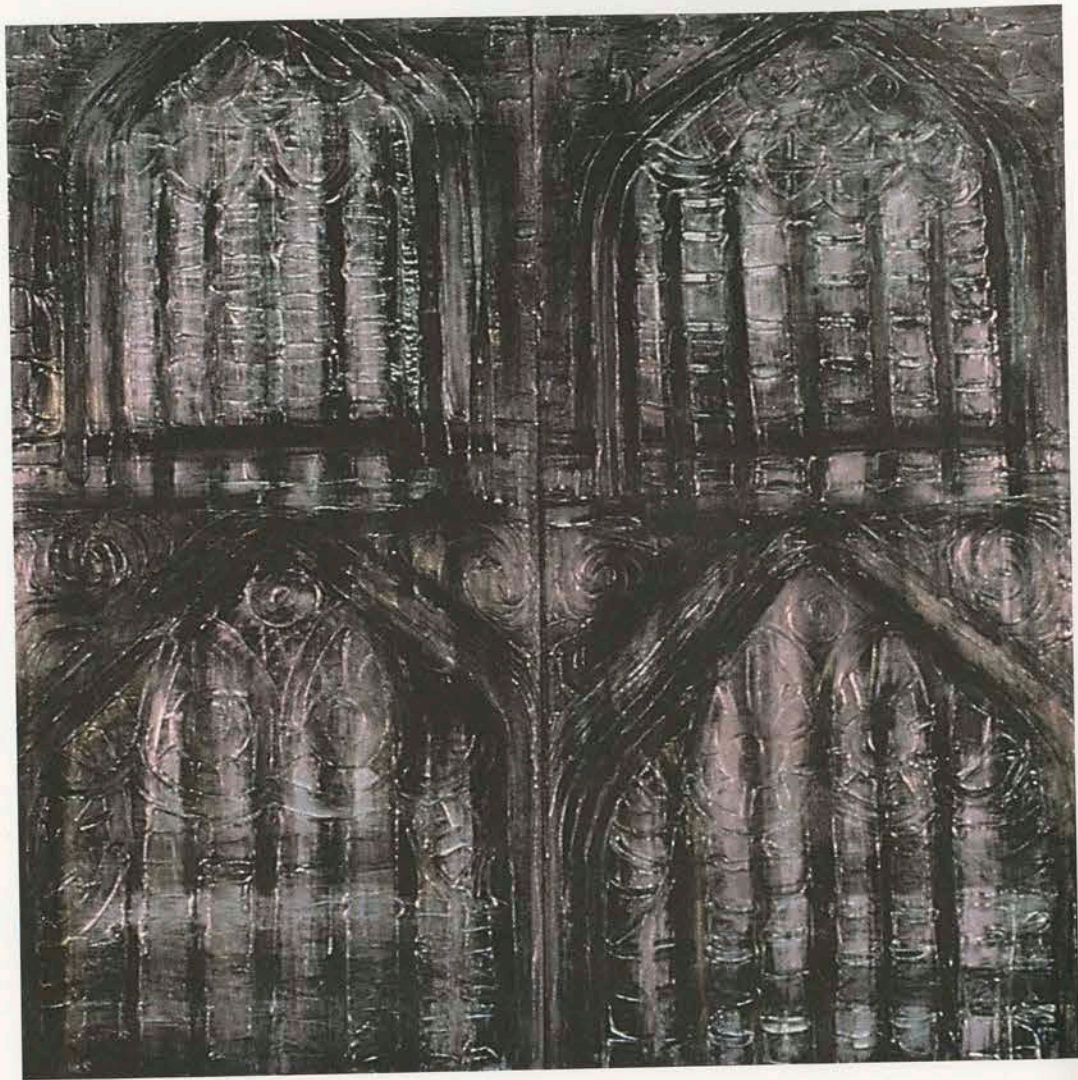


UNTITLED (OLYMPIAN), 1989, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD

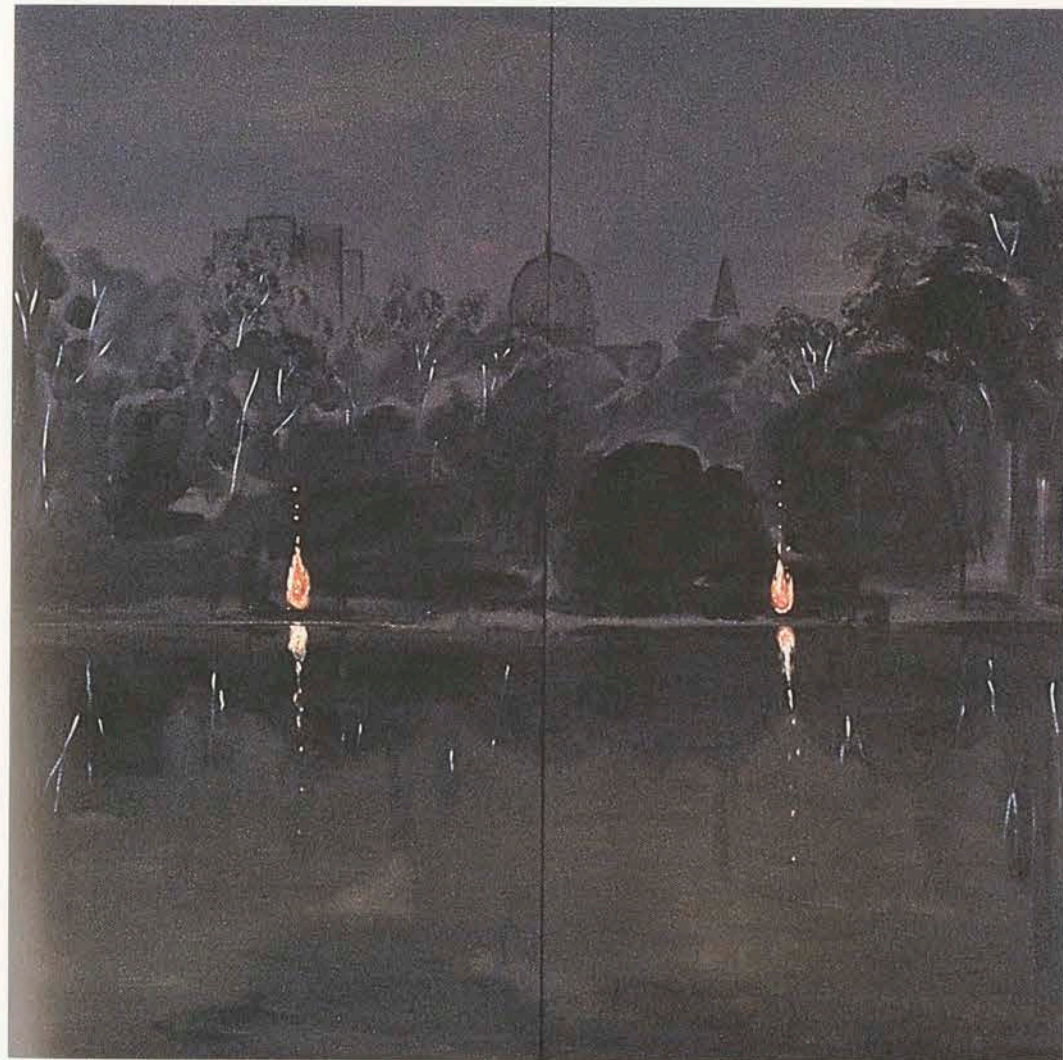


UNTITLED (CATTILEYA ORCHID AND ONE BRAZILIAN HUMMINGBIRD), 1989, 8 X 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD





UNTITLED (BOLTON ABBEY), 1990, 8 x 8 FT., MARBLE PASTE AND ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD



UNTITLED (NATIVE FIRES), 1990, 8 x 8 FT., ACRYLIC PAINT ON PLYWOOD



W A N D A K O O P

Born 1951  
Vancouver, British Columbia

E D U C A T I O N

1973 University of Manitoba School of Art  
Diploma of Fine Art

S E L E C T E D S O L O E X H I B I T I O N S

1991 "Recent Paintings", Garth Drabinsky Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

1990 "The Print and Drawing Council of Canada", Toronto, Ontario

1988 "Flying to the Moon", 49th Parallel Gallery, New York, U.S.A.

1987 "Northern Suite" (Catalogue), Canada House, London, England  
"Flying to the Moon", Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, Alberta  
"Northern Suite" (Catalogue), Women in Focus, Floating Curatorial Gallery,  
Vancouver, British Columbia

1985 - "Airplanes and the Wall" (Catalogue)  
1986 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario  
Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

1985 "Train Series", Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

1984 Olga Korper Gallery (Catalogue), Toronto, Ontario  
"Preliminary Drawings", Plug-In Inc., Winnipeg, Manitoba

1983 "Building in the Pool of the Black Star", Legislative Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
"Nine Signs" (Catalogue), Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta

1982 London Regional Art Gallery (Catalogue), London, Ontario

1981 Winnipeg Art Gallery (Catalogue), Winnipeg, Manitoba

S E L E C T E D G R O U P E X H I B I T I O N S

1989 "Off the Beaten Track", Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland

1987 "Contemporary Art in Manitoba", Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
"A Multiplicity of Voices" (Catalogue), Gallery III and Plug-In Inc., Winnipeg, Manitoba

1986 - The Eighth Dalhousie Drawing Exhibition (Catalogue), Dalhousie Art Gallery,  
1987 Halifax, Nova Scotia

1986 "Songs of Experience" (Catalogue), The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario  
"Another Prairie" (Catalogue), Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, Ontario

1983 "New Perceptions in Landscape" (Catalogue), Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto,  
Ontario  
"Contemporary Canadian Art — The Younger Generation", Edmonton Art Gallery,  
Edmonton, Alberta

1980 "Twelve Canadian Artists" (Catalogue)  
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario  
Pauline McGibbon Cultural Centre, Toronto, Ontario

1979 "Form and Performance" (Catalogue), Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

1977 "New Abstract Art", Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta



1975 - "Young Contemporaries" (Catalogue), London Regional Art Gallery, London,  
1980 Ontario

1972 "Winnipeg Under 30", Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

#### AWARDS AND GRANTS

1990 The Paris Studio, Canada Council

1989 Arts Grant "A", Canada Council  
Art Ventures "A", Manitoba Arts Council

1988 Project Grant, Canada Council

1988/86 Major Arts Grant, Manitoba Arts Council  
/80/78

1985/83 Arts Grant "B", Canada Council  
/81/77

1983/81/ Project Grant, Manitoba Arts Council  
77

1975 Senior Arts Grant, Manitoba Arts Council

1974 Manisphere International, Outstanding Prairie Interpretation

1972 Manisphere International, Outstanding Award, American and Canadian

1971 Manitoba Society of Artists, Outstanding Painting

#### COLLECTIONS

Air Canada, Montreal, Quebec, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa, Ontario

Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, Ontario

Diane Keaton, New York, N.Y.

Esso - Aviat, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

Nova Corporation, Calgary, Alberta

Power Corporation, Montreal, Quebec

Shell Canada, Calgary, Alberta

Standard Life Insurance Company, Montreal, Quebec

Steinberg Corporation, Montreal, Quebec

The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Heath, Terrence. "Three Prairie Pieces: Winnipeg Under 30", *Arts Canada*, (February/March 1973, pp. 74-80).

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\_\_\_\_\_. "Off the Beaten Track", *Alba Magazine*, Scotland, (Summer 1989, pp. 53-54).

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Rans, Goldie. "Wanda Koop: London Regional Art Gallery, May 7 to July 11", *Parachute*, (October 1982, p. 40).

Richardson, Letia, and Leslie Savage. "A Visual Tribute to Marta Danyiewicz", *Canadian Women's Studies*, (Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall 1986).

Robertson, Sheila. "Massive Airplane Paintings Chilling", *Star Phoenix*, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, (January 3, 1986).

Shuebrook, Ron. "Form and Performance", *Arts Canada*, (May/June 1979, pp. 32-35).

Taylor, Kate. "My Work is from My Life", *The Globe and Mail*, (Tuesday, January 22, 1991).

Tousley, Nancy. "Chinese Series Transcends Image", *Calgary Herald*, Calgary, Alberta, (August 21, 1987).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Signs Point to Art on a Scale Nearing Sculpture", *Calgary Herald*, Calgary, Alberta, (August 20, 1983).

Whiteway, Doug. "Artist Works on Heroic Scale", *Winnipeg Free Press*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, (November 14, 1985).

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

(installation at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1991)

page 11, illus.

Clockwise around the room, acrylic paint on plywood, 8' x 8'.

Untitled (*Waterfall*)

Untitled (*Smiling Man*)

Untitled (*Mandela*)

Untitled (*Olympian*)

Untitled (*Cattelya Orchid and one Brazilian Hummingbird*)

Untitled (*Native Fires*)

Untitled (*Veil of Veronica*)

Untitled (*Juan de Fuca Strait*)

Untitled (*Bolton Abbey*)

Untitled (*Face*)

Untitled (*Baby*)

Untitled (*Swan*)

Untitled (*Plane Tree*)

Untitled (*Shell*)

Untitled (*Tracking Station*)

Untitled (*Head Spanner*)

Untitled (*Tree of Life*)

Untitled (*Monkey and Child*)

Works in the exhibition were completed in 1989-90.



