

BORDERCROSSINGS



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WANDA KOOP

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VENICE BIENNALE

INFRA-MINCE: PAINTING THE INVISIBLE IN ART

PRAYER WHEELS AND COLOUR PAINTING

PAINTING

THE BEAUTIFUL LAMENT

An Interview with Wanda Koop

Interview by Robert Enright
Introduction by Meeka Walsh

The eight large paintings, 108 x 84 inches, in Wanda Koop's recent series titled "Dreamline" are lamentations, her response to the imperilled natural world—this body of work that she describes "as a beautiful lament for the planet." Her engagement and connection with nature have always been there, and with her career-long observations and visual note taking in the form of quick ink drawings in notebooks or on hasty notes, with a camera and later a video camera and now her cell phone, or through her own assiduous memory, she has documented the decline of the natural world. Fewer and fewer animals and fewer and fewer birds are what she is seeing, or, more poignantly, not seeing. This tight, coherent series is for Koop a kind of historical record, referring, as many of the paintings do, to earlier works that represent past and current issues. As with all her paintings the impetus or impelling drive is both biographical and universal. Universal in that she is socially engaged but not political in a didactic sense; for Koop the art is primary and prevalent and in its effectiveness touches what is essential in all of us. She says, "The only hope is art," and it is in this way she will communicate and connect. I think here of an interview *Border Crossings* published with the American artist Robert Motherwell in 1989. We asked him why art matters to him. He said, "Basically my interest is to communicate and to

have a medium that is as expressive in its complexity as is a human being. ... What could really be more interesting or in the end more ecstatic than in those rare moments when you see another person look at something you've made and realize that they got it exactly, that your heart jumped to their heart, with nothing in between?" Wanda Koop subscribes to this ecstatic ideal condition as well.

Wanda Koop works in series, some like "Green Zone" with as many as 300 paintings, some as contained as "Dreamline" with only eight, and each has a coherent and identifiable subject. In "Seaway," 2012, it was a voyage on a freighter along the St Lawrence Seaway; in "Green Zone," 2007, it was the war in Iraq; in "In Absentia," 2016, it was the period of time the artist spent in New York City with its determining and unavoidable vertical architecture. But whatever the theme of a body of work, Koop's overriding, prevailing subject is colour. Not paint as a material but colour as material. She is the consummate colourist. What appears as a translucent veil is 15 layers of pigment; what reads as a single application of one solid colour is, on closer reading, a well-worked and intense surface with subtle gradations; a slight tonal shift buzzes the eye; a seven-foot-high canvas, blue in its variations, produces a sky as rich and immaterial as a sky is. Tiepolo comes to mind.

British writer David Batchelor wrote a tidy book on colour—not directly in praise of, but addressing the



subject by explaining its sometimes critical reception. He writes of the historical prejudice against colour, going back to recorded beginnings, with Aristotle. In *Chromophobia* (Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2000), he wrote, “As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia.” To elaborate on his definition, and to make reference to 19th-century investigations of this prejudice, Batchelor draws heavily on Charles Blanc’s text in *Grammar of Painting and Engraving* from 1867. He describes Blanc’s comparing the risks of colour with the use of drugs—both offering a fraught and dangerous trajectory—and gives us Blanc’s description of the descent into colour: “sensuous, intoxicating, unstable, impermanent, loss of control, loss of focus, loss of self...” The list comprises what I would hazard is an achieved state sought after by artists as an experience of their own and wishing, also, to replicate for their viewers. (I hear a chorus of Molly Bloom’s ecstatic and reverberating “Yes” uttered at the conclusion of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.) At the extreme end of Blanc’s chromophobic warning is Roland Barthes’s description of colour as “bliss,” Batchelor here pointing out his using the same terminology but eroticizing it instead. “In Barthes’s hands,” Batchelor notes, “chromophobia is turned into its opposite: a kind of chromophilia.” Blanc cites the history-endorsed dialectic of design versus colour—line or drawing as opposed to colour, and we know where the sanction falls. But this is not an issue for Wanda Koop. In her work, line and colour are a fused whole; colour is design, and the issue Batchelor notes that arose in the ’60s when industrialized paint tested the possibility of easel painting, of painting as representation, can’t be readily applied to Koop’s work. A closer parallel in the area Batchelor refers to as the cosmetic use of colour is Andy Warhol and Barthes’s reference to the artifice of chemistry rather than the colours of nature. Think of Wanda Koop in reference to Warhol’s keeping distinct the line between design and colour through his deliberate misregistration. The result, Batchelor writes, is that, “in his work in general, his design and colour are in a constant state of mutual agitation.” So, while there’s not a direct visual parallel between Koop and Warhol, the buzz of his candy-coloured or alternately sombre-hued portraits occurs, too, when the eye tries to pin down line and colour in Koop’s “Dreamline” work.

The eight paintings in this body of work read to me as fragments, broken, interrupted and inconclusive narratives, except for the consistent lament. Their cropping—left to right—heightens their elusive quality and the allusion, perhaps, to some kind

of eternity. If they neither begin nor end.... These paintings also ask some formal questions. The large canvases are still not large enough to contain the subject, a subject that appears to have originated from somewhere else, pushing the edges for space to complete what is being given. At the same time these are centred paintings focused in a symmetrical middle. As viewer, you experience a mild sense of tyranny; the artist controls the point of view. And the viewer is left outside the offering, halted at the canvases’ lower edge. No entry is possible; everything at your feet, where you stand at the bottom of these stately large canvases, is water or air. The closest entry is middle ground, which is, of course, a conundrum or visual tautology.

The lower portion of *Satellite City* is divided into quadrants. Roadways or retaining dikes mark the bays or areas in a four-leaf-clover-of-a-design with a cluster of buildings at its centre. The light is muted and the atmosphere appears to hold as much moisture as it possibly could, or maybe it’s smoke or a pollutant that colours this luminous environment. A flood is immanent. Unease prevails.

I read *River* as the most complex of the eight works and think of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. The gestures in the lower third of the canvas could be directed by anger or haste, but the sky is closely attended to: red on washed turquoise over a gassy green under a dry brush drawn horizontally left to right. At the horizon an almost clear robin’s egg blue, and above, an intense spectrum of colour. In *Reflect*, the title tells the subject. The application of colour, of mark. The artist has left irregularities on the surface, top left and lower right. On the left it’s as though colour has been blotted, smudged or removed. On the lower right there is a splatter of paint. Like Monet’s water lily surfaces—almost floral here. Each of the paintings shows two vertical lines of colour, top down. Reading as drips, they are, instead, carefully painted. Situated in the foreground, they intercept initial deeper perception. There are two in each case, coming initially from a significant earlier work that Koop says is iconic for her. The image’s source is works titled “Native Fires”; Native fires in close proximity to where she lives and works and strong reminders, she says, that we are “transients on this land.” The fires have dropped into tears, an appropriate response to a body of work Wanda Koop describes as a lament for this planet.

The following interview was conducted with the artist in her Winnipeg studio on July 16, 2019. Wanda Koop’s solo exhibition “Dreamline” will be exhibited at the Dallas Museum of Art, from October 20, 2019, to February 2, 2020. She will also have a solo exhibition titled “Notre-Dame de Paris” at Galerie Division, Montreal, September 12 to November 2, 2019.

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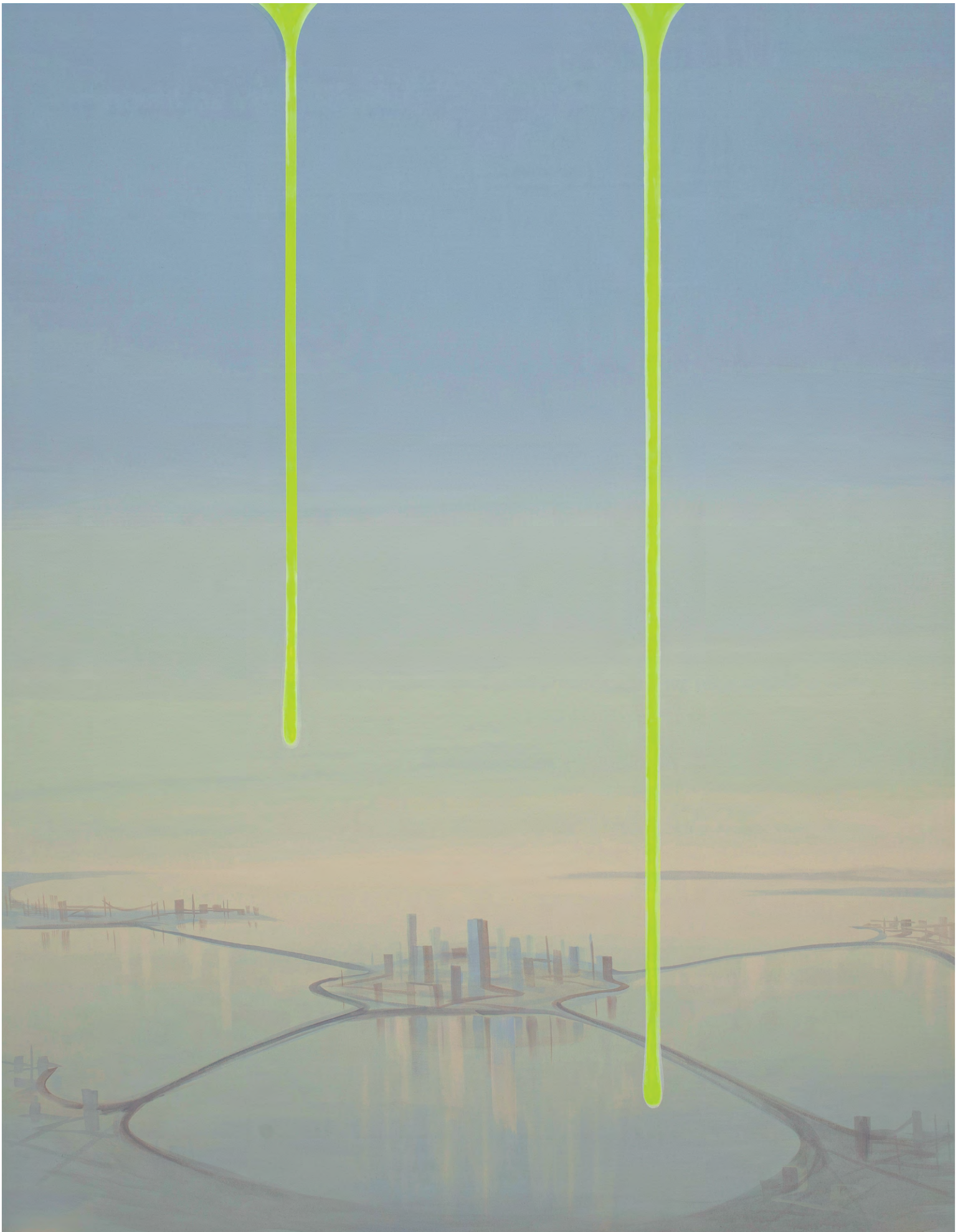
Wanda Koop, *Dreamline: River*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches.

Photo: William Eakin. All images courtesy the artist.

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Dreamline: Satellite City, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches. Photo:

William Eakin.



BORDER CROSSINGS: Do you start out with the intention of doing a series of paintings or do you begin by making one painting and that single work generates a series?

WANDA KOOP: I never quite know where I'm headed with a particular body of work. I start out with something that engages me and I make tiny shorthand notes, often black and white, and then move to small paintings and finally to larger ones. In that process I'm always asking myself what is it that's compelling me to move along, what allows it. It's like the wormhole opens. Sometimes the process is all it is. So it is either a series, a body of work, or an installation and it morphs into the next body of work. But with "Dreamline" I actually created the work for the Dallas Museum.

So in beginning the first of the "Dreamline" paintings, did you have a number in your head about what it would take to complete the series?

I knew that I needed eight paintings, I knew the space and I knew what I needed to accomplish. It's a beautiful, intimate space, and I had to create something that would speak to my history and also to the viewer's experience. When the viewer came into the space, I wanted them to be able to lose themselves.

You say you work in tiny black and white shorthand notes. Is that always how you start off and then move through progressively larger scales until you get to the final painting?

That's pretty much the process, and each one of the paintings in "Dreamline" went through it. "Seaway" was a body of work I made when taking an ocean freighter up the St Lawrence Seaway for seven days and nights and it culminated in a large blue painting that I called *My Mother Lives on That Island*, which is now at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. In doing this work I wanted to reiterate a sense that one part of the river and the seaway was reflecting something deeply personal about the passage of time.

You say you wanted to speak to your own history, but I would argue that you have been speaking to your own history all along. Do you know when earlier bodies of work are going to come into present bodies of work, or is that a catalytic process that happens in the making of the work?

It happens in the making of the work. I've used the "Native fires" image so often that it has become iconic. I think that very compact image is probably the most profound image I've ever created. So I've continued to draw on it. The painting *River* relates to a piece in the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal called *Home and Native Land* where the Native fires have dropped into tears.

Did the Native fires start out as fire or as a teardrop?

They started out as fire and they became a teardrop and then they evolved into something cutting through the surface of the painting.

Can you remember the moment when the fire initially turns into the teardrop and why that transformation would have happened?

It happened when I did a show in the Netherlands at Westergasfabriek. I had made this 10 x 14-foot billboard painting that combined the two fires and the same corporate, political and religious power structure on the horizon, and then the fires became flaming teardrops instead of a representation of fire. I'm not quite sure why it happened. I had done a painting with a massive mercurial teardrop, and when it was installed in Toronto a child thought it was three-dimensional, almost a Philippe Starck shape, and she jumped up to the painting to try to grab the teardrop.

In the "Dreamline" series, *Capitol* shows the same setting without the fires?

Yes. In stripping it of all the other references, it is clearly a political piece.

Do you think all your work is political, and how would you characterize the nature of that political relationship?

I don't think all my work is political, but I am. I'm an activist. Both "Nine Signs" (1983) and "Building in the Pool of the Black Star" (1983) were bodies of work that dealt with what we're doing to the environment. I would take road trips and make fast-moving notes from the car, the way I do now with my cell phone, or the way I made notes from watching television. So I'm constantly aware of what is going on in the world. I abhor art in which the politics come before the art. Being an artist and being able to create is an incredible mysterious thing that speaks to our humanity. So, for me, art has to be so big that it encompasses all our histories as well as what we observe politically, and it makes sense only if, like a beautiful poem or an incredible piece of music, it touches the human psyche and the human soul.

So I'm assuming that anytime a natural environment occurs in your work, there is built into it a comment about the natural world and what we are doing to it. There seems always to be some sort of dialogue going on between them.

There is definitely a dialogue. I see this body of work as a beautiful lament for the planet.

Note for In Absentia, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 14 inches. Photo: William Eakin.



“Lamentation” is a word that carries a rich emotional meaning. It suggests a passionate response to what is lost. In the face of the lamentable events that your paintings are reflecting, where does hope come in?

To me, the only hope is in art. There are a lot of times when I am glad my life is half over because, unless something changes, the future can be seen as very bleak. But, I look at technology, which I’m following all the time, and if we can reforest our world and put a moratorium on a lot of the things we’re doing, the world will heal itself. The creative force of being human, which is found in art, is also found in technology. I don’t know if it can shift. You look at history and you see evidence that some things have changed for the better and other things have come to an end. The irony is that we are here for such an incredibly short period of time, just a moment really, and all I am doing is what I can do in that moment.

What is the sequence of composing the paintings in “Dreamline”?

The first painting is called *River* and it was actually shown in New York. It came out of the exhibition “Standing Withstanding” and the painting was about the Dakota Pipeline protests and the whole question of the river and respect for Indigenous

people. Here in Winnipeg I live close to an environment that most people don’t experience. The Indigenous people still camp along the riverbank just a block away and Thunderbird House, an Indigenous meeting place, is down the street in the other direction. I’m the founder of an art centre that works with Indigenous kids and so I never lose sight of the fact that the land is not ours. We’re the transients on this land.

Do you think the sense of social engagement you have has any connection to your having been raised Mennonite?

My family had been very wealthy and lost everything during the Russian Revolution. I was born in Canada, but my parents were immigrants and so I was the child of immigrants. We were always on the outside; my parents didn’t quite integrate into Canadian culture and the religion itself had us separated from everyone else. In order to survive, they became much more cautious and I found it repressive as a child. So becoming an artist and watching the world was my way of navigating something with which I wasn’t comfortable. I didn’t feel like I fit.

After *River* how did the series develop?

I was trying to figure out how it was going to work in the gallery space in Dallas. I’ve had exhibitions in large institutions and

museums and I am comfortable with space. I love to make installations. One piece is always speaking to another one. But the installation was part of that whole process we're talking about. By the time I saw "Standing Withstanding" at Arsenal Contemporary in New York, I was able to distance myself from it and realized I wasn't done with what I had started. I felt it was a little too specific. It was strange because once I realized this was the wormhole opening, which I had to enter, I did a whole series of smaller, 30 x 40-inch paintings. I'm not showing those paintings because it would be reiterating what I have already done, but they were necessary in order for me to see what I was doing. Then I started making the paintings and, of course, all hell breaks loose. I'm never quite sure if it's going to work.

What do you mean?

Making the big paintings is hard. I make them look easy, but I struggle every single time. In that regard I am not formulaic: every painting has its own code and its own way of becoming. *Look Up* feels like you could actually breathe it in, but if I had done one more layer on that airy surface, it would have been gone. When I'm building and building I have to know when to pull back. It's about having the wisdom to leave it alone.

How many layers does *Look Up* have?

Maybe five. *Deep Bay* and *Capitol* have more. *Capitol* has the most and it varies because different parts of the painting have more than other parts, so I'd say 10. And *Reflect* started out shocking pink. Underneath the surface is a fluorescent pink painting. Originally, *Deep Bay* had three or four layers of fluorescent orange.

When you're painting the 30 x 40-inch size, are you also layering them?

Not quite in the same way. It takes more to achieve this kind of atmospheric quality in the larger paintings. The skill it takes is very different in comparison with the head-to-hand knowledge that I apply in the smaller works. I remember George Swinton telling me in art school that I drew too well and maybe sometimes I paint too well. When I was younger I fought against my abilities. So if you look at "Nine Signs" (1983) and "Airplanes and the Wall" (1985), people thought I didn't know how to paint. I was happy with that. They were as raw and as crude as I could make them. I was looking at Outsider art for clues on how to find a balance between my ability and what I had to say. So I was brutal and I think those paintings are audacious. When people look at them today, they think they were just painted. But when I made them I suffered because I didn't think anyone was



1. *SEEWAY: Deborah lives on that Island*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Photo: Bruce Spielman.

2. *Note for Standing Withstanding*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches. Photo: William Eakin.



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ready for them. Then somewhere along the line I decided that I could still say what I had to say, but I could do that using all my technical ability. I didn't have to hide what I could do.

How did your interest in Outsider art develop?

Initially it was because the *Winnipeg Free Press* ran an article about a guy in Quebec named Arthur Villeneuve, who had painted his kitchen. I cut out the article and hung it on the bulletin board in my bedroom. I would have been maybe 12, and that was the beginning of realizing there was other art out there. I was going to classes at the Winnipeg Art Gallery and I was seeing all the "great art" in the Gort Collection and I had seen the van Gogh exhibition here at an early age, which was transformative. But I had never actually seen Outsider art. At one point I drove my parents nuts when we moved to the house on Leslie Avenue because I painted everything: I painted the kitchen cabinets, I painted an old guitar that I had found and hung it on the wall. I was doing an Arthur Villeneuve.

You seem to have an acute tonal memory and a memory for colour. You look at some thing or a landscape and you know how to replicate it. Have

you had to develop that or was it an innate understanding of tonality?

Well, I started painting when I was a child and I've been doing it for 50 years, so I've developed a visual vocabulary and a knowledge of how to layer acrylic paint. But I see everything in colour. I make those little black and white notes and they are already coloured for me. When I'm gessoing the paintings, I'm seeing what's going to happen in relation to that gesso.

If you're thinking in colour, why bother with the tiny black and white notes?

They're the shorthand that tells me what to get excited about in doing the painting in colour. That structure or that little line or that tiny crumb of information is possibly a rainbow.

As you move up in scale, is each stage also telling you something necessary to get you to the place where you can finish the large painting?

I think so. Partly it's courage and a distancing and an ability to be outside of myself. By the time I get there, the painting no longer belongs to me. It speaks to something larger. I trust the part of me that isn't me, the part of me that is human, the part that is longing for something, the part that is like you. So I'm hunting for it and I'm working through it. Ultimately, I don't know how people will view these paintings, but, for me, they come out of a lifetime of trying to communicate something that goes beyond both my observations and my ability as a painter.

All the different blues in *Seeway* are an example of your control of graduating tone. It is slightly more dense at the bottom; around the horizon line the blue becomes almost radiant; and then as you move up the tone darkens until you reach the top of the composition, where it reads as indigo. What does it take to get that tonal shift?

I don't know until it happens.

You've told me before that you dream the painting before you make it. Do you still do that?

Always. I had notes for *Look Up*, but the execution is like learning to drive a car or taking a test. I have to visualize all the steps and the drying times and the viscosity and how dense and wet the gesso process is going to be in order to achieve this kind of airiness. It is not an accident and it's not simply an execution. I'm on edge; I'm high energy and wired.

You mentioned earlier that when all hell breaks loose, you're still able to pull it back from disaster. Can you give me an example in the series where that happened?

In *Reflect* I was having real problems with a resist going on with the gesso, so I had to paint and paint and paint and there were still areas that had this interference, and at one point I decided I really loved that. I could have gotten rid of it, but I decided to keep it. It's that splash on the lower right-hand side and it gives the painting depth. Or there is a section on the bottom of *Seaway* that looks like inverted trees. So I let things happen and there are other large paintings where I have let more happen. In the end it is all controlled because I am deciding whether or not it is going to stay. Some of the drips are painted and some are for real. I spent a year teaching myself how to draw a drip. I first did a set of paintings with real drips; then I proceeded to do 100 drawings where I drew the drip.

So they're not a variation on a Morris Louis pour. Are the painted drips always the last thing to go in?

Yes, and because they represent a tear I put two on every painting.

The paintings in "In Absentia" explore the figure/ground relationship and the zone between space and building. In the "Dreamline" paintings, are you also walking a delicate line between two modes of representation? Are these simpler or more complicated paintings in that regard?

I wouldn't say simpler and more complicated, but I would say they're less clear in one way. "In Absentia" was definitely about this positive/negative thing, and the success of those paintings was that place between something emerging and something disappearing. When they reach the top they move towards architecture where they're constructed and they become formal, but when they start moving down it is like a plate glass window or something to look through. In a way "Unseen Seen" is the precursor of this work because it was the start of making paintings of the unknown, about things you can't see, about algorithms and sound waves and all the things that are going on that we can't comprehend or understand and yet they are in us. So I've been responding to that energy and putting it into painting. The marks in the painting are the energy of being human and responding to what we don't understand. In "Dreamline" I took it back to something that is more comprehensible for an audience.

When I look at the drips or elongated teardrops, am I seeing them as a space and a thing in front of the landscape? Are they something I am looking through?

I think you're looking at, through and around them. They produce an almost three-dimensional experience. Someone who isn't in the art world visited the studio and he said, "These paintings are like movies, except you move yourself and then they move." It's like a painting I did in "Green Zone" with running soldiers and white intersecting lines. They were cut lines from the digital breakup that I used as an interference. That painting was pivotal to the work in "Dreamlines" because I realized that I could create a very, very deep space. It was different from "Sightlines" where the image floating on top alluded to deep space but it was much more a graphic device for seeing. When I did the "Green Zone" paintings, it struck me that I could manipulate the surface and move in and around, almost as if I were on a hovercraft.

And the thickness of the line changes. In *Seaway* the line on the left-hand side is much thicker. In other cases there isn't such a discrepancy between the weight of the dropping lines.

Yes, and the colouration also changes in all the drips. It starts somewhere and ends up somewhere else. In some of them the handling is a little more fragile, so as it moves down, the actual drip itself is tentative.

Do you load your brush with enough pigment that you can complete the gesture from the funnelled top to the end?

No. I have to go back and get more paint on the brush. On the small paintings I can do it in one move but not in the larger ones. It's scary because it is really easy to fuck up these paintings. When you're putting in the two lines, you have to commit to a number of considerations: how far apart should they be, how thick, and how are they going to relate to the painting next to them when they're installed?

Why are the drips in *Reflect* so different?

The painting came out of an exhibition called "Reflect" that recently showed at Franklin Parrasch in New York. That body of work was a response to a personal experience that was actually horrific. It was my way of keeping my balance through that time. I don't often paint directly from something I can't distance myself from because I'm always looking for the bigger picture. In this case I didn't have a bigger picture; I only had a certain level of despair. It started with a reflection on water and it almost became an exercise of immersion; I was able to use all the things I had at my disposal but not try to do anything more than that. So I created this ephemeral body of work that taught me all kinds of other things. It became a highly emotional exercise that expanded my visual vocabulary. I also felt it was important to shift the narrative so that it wasn't a didactic series of eight paintings with tears cutting the surface. To me, *Reflect* is key to the resonance this body of work has because it throws the viewer into another place at the same time that it fits the overall series.

The lower section of *Spill* gives a sense of a perspectival landscape and is the most minimal of the paintings in the series. How does it fit the sequence of making, and do you think of it as different from the others?

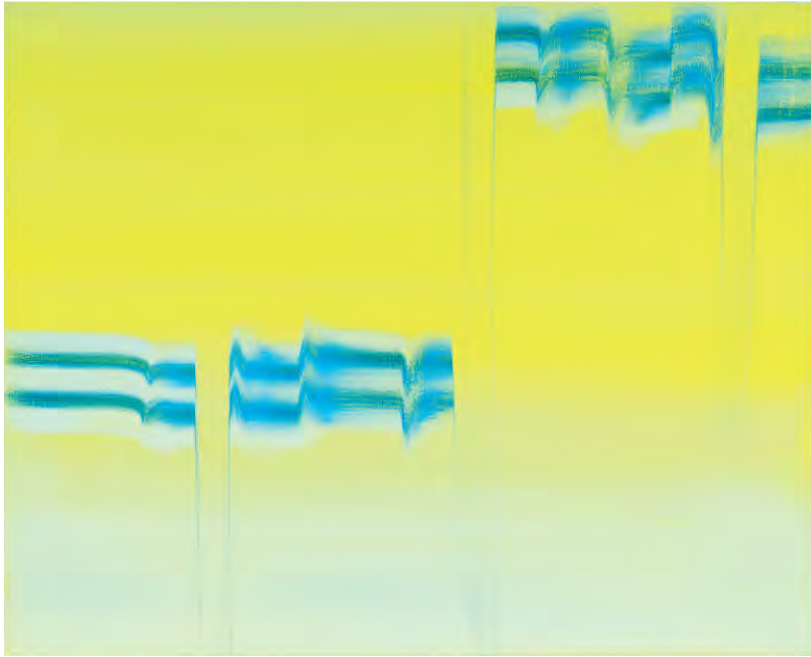
It speaks to the land. We've got water, air and land, three basic references, and the other paintings spill off into technology, the expansion of the urban environment and how we're impacted by what happens in the world of politics.

***Spill* is the most linear and regimented of the paintings, and none of the other works in the series have that sense of balance. Even the drips are exactly the same length.**

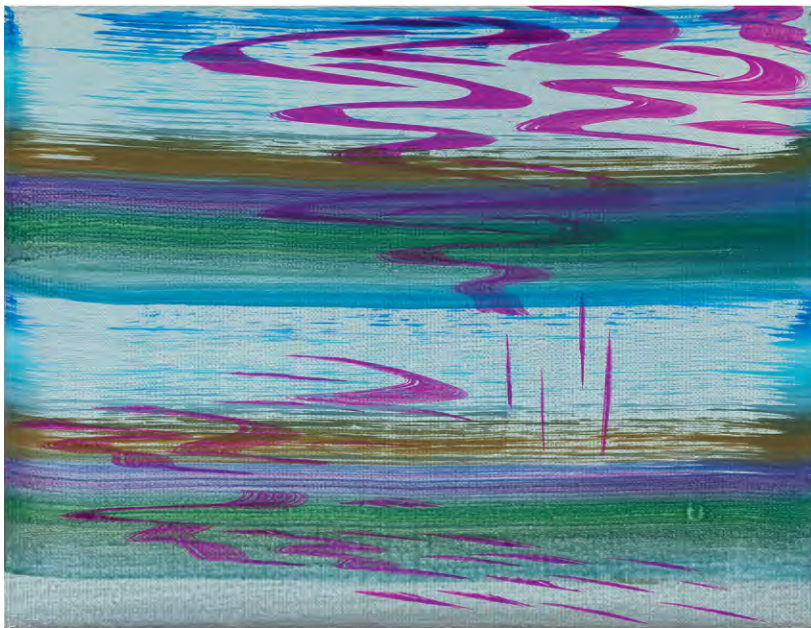
Yes. If you look closely, as the drips get to the bottom they glow blue at the base, so they're oily. I want them to represent oil and the land.

There are also 26 smaller works in the exhibition. What is their relationship to the eight large paintings?

Katherine Brodbeck, the curator, and I picked them out, and instead of making a didactic timeline, we made the continuation



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1. *Rolling River (UNSEEN SEEN)*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 6 x 20 inches. Photo: Bruce Spielman.

2. *Deep Bay: Reflection*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 inches. Photo: Bruce Spielman.

of a dream line. There are certain small works that give information about how the large paintings came into being without limiting how they should be seen.

So their function is to create resonances with the larger works. Are the 26 paintings also talking to themselves?

Yes. They're going to be sitting on a shelf. There is a vent in the gallery that is two black lines sitting about a foot below the ceiling that ends halfway around the space, and so when Katherine showed me the gallery, I asked, "Can we continue those lines right around the room?" and she said, "Sure." Then I asked, "Can we paint the colour between the lines fluorescent orange?" and she said, "Great." So it will be a wall painting and there will be the shelf

with these paintings sitting on it, almost like a library. In the book I am making to accompany the exhibition, there is a section that doesn't include the little paintings in the show, but it represents a more fleshed-out version of many paintings that have influenced all this work.

You have an absolutely unique and unorthodox colour sense. Where in the world does it come from?

It started very early in art school. I had a professor who was teaching us colour and we were all painting beige and ochre and it was just awful. But in the same class there were three students from Hong Kong and I noticed, while all their painting palettes were the same, they were using pink and green. So they had their specific palette and we all had this other one. I started thinking there is something going on here. I was a 17-year-old kid on the prairies who hadn't had an opportunity to get out and I decided that colour had to do with culture. So I started methodically researching that idea in university and I have spent a lifetime looking at culture and the meaning and expansion of colour: of how I can use it in a psychological way; or how I can use it to make a lament, or to make something exuberant or horrific and beautiful at the same time. I can do all that through colour and I'm still working at expanding that visual vocabulary. It really started to happen while I was watching the spectacle of the Olympics many years ago. I saw things like the downhill skiers with their racing stripes, and over a period of time what happened was that fluorescent colours and neon signs became more and more integrated into our society. So what used to be red when I was a kid is now sienna. Even pure red isn't red red anymore. A quite remarkable shift has happened in the last 10 years.

Colour, then, doesn't have a specific meaning in a painting. The meaning is determined by what the painting is doing?

It's always contingent on what I am trying to articulate.

So your palette is a vast territory of possibilities?

It's an endless territory. That said, I've noticed that there is a monochrome element to a lot of my paintings. It's not that I can't paint a riotously colourful painting; it's just that when I do, it loses its meaning. It becomes only about colour and not what it is about on a deeper level. The colour range is usually articulated by the relationship of one painting to another.



You live in a social environment, a media environment and a natural environment and you use them all.

I draw from my experiences, from the technological world, from a collective knowledge and from my knowledge as a painter, to articulate these observations. I also draw from the natural world. So if I go up to Riding Mountain now for a month and paint, I'm in an unbelievably beautiful environment and it is heartbreaking because it is at risk. We're actually protecting a section of land there because there is no moratorium on what we do to this boreal forest on top of the mountain. No one is looking and, apart from the park boundaries,

it is free for the taking. I'm painting in an idyllic place, but I see fewer and fewer animals and birds. So we are becoming more and more an oasis in a sea of environmental disregard.

Because you have been painting for so long and have made so many strong bodies of work, does your painting become more self-reflexive? These eight paintings seem to be summary.

Yes. They encapsulate something and I don't want to do any more of these. This is it.

Does that say something about where you are in your life and your painting practice?

1. *Dreamline: Reflect*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches. Photo: William Eakin.

2. *Dreamline: Seaway*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 inches. Photo: William Eakin.



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I had a guru in India tell me that I would live to be 110, but last night I had a very clear dream that I was going to be 105. But what is clear is that I couldn't have done a reflective body of work like this when I was young.

Can painting still do more than any other art form?

Every decade I would do a large-scale installation that included video and painting, but I look back now and think maybe I was trying too hard. I wanted to do something that was bigger than myself. I mean, I've always been theatrical and there is a side of me that loves space and loves

making large paintings. In a way, they always felt like backdrops for life. But for a decade painting in Canada was poorly regarded and it was difficult to be a painter, so I was trying to say, "This is what I am thinking; this is how I am feeling; this is what I am seeing," and if I could do it through these other means, then maybe I could communicate what I wanted to say. I desperately wanted to communicate something. Now I don't know if I ever need to do another one. I'm more in love with painting than I ever have been. It's head-to-hand energy and it's so pure. It agitates me and I like being agitated. ■