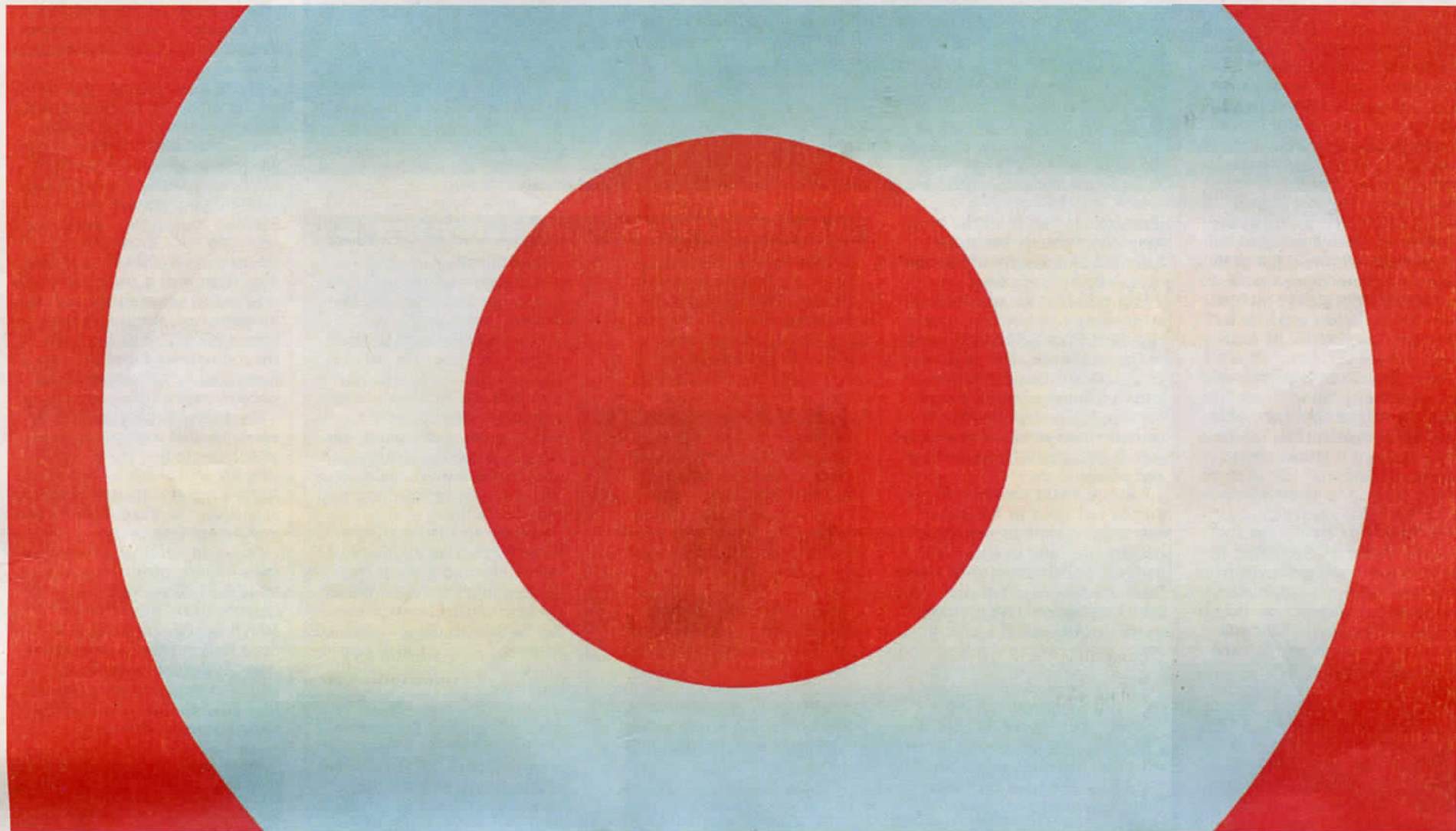


Globe Arts

ARTS EDITOR: ANDREW GORHAM

VISUAL ARTS REVIEW



The splendour of her all-seeing eye

The work of Winnipeg artist Wanda Koop spans vast scales and multiple dimensions

Wanda Koop: On the Edge of Experience pulls together selected pieces from the artist's multiple major series, such as this untitled work from *Sightlines*, as well as new works. **BRUCE SPIELMAN**

ROBERT ENRIGHT OTTAWA

Iwant the effect of my art to be as if I had taken a camera and spun around 360 degrees, so that I take in everything in all directions," was the way Wanda Koop spoke 35 years ago about her artistic ambitions in the wide-open spaces of the Prairies.

In a professional career now in its fourth decade, she has set about to realize that ambition. And, on the basis of *On the Edge of Experience*, her survey

show that just opened at the National Gallery in Ottawa, she seems to have become that all-seeing eye.

The exhibition (co-mounted with the Winnipeg Art Gallery), culls paintings from the multiple major series the artist has produced since 1986, and out of that selection creates a new and compelling exhibition.

Koop is astonishingly inventive, both in the number and scale of her production. *Green Zone*, an ongoing series that be-

gan as a reaction to the Iraq War in 2003, numbers more than 200 works in various dimensions. For her 1983 exhibition in the Pool of the Black Star room in the Manitoba Legislature, she constructed and arranged 144 running feet of painting on plywood.

She has never been reluctant to use unconventional materials: In addition to plywood, she has painted on upholstery and convertible-car-top fabric.

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“My art has to be bigger than I am, otherwise it's just an idea.”

Wanda Koop

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Koop: 14 maquettes recreate past shows in miniature

» For 10 years in the eighties, she painted on 8-foot-square sheets of plywood and produced a remarkable number of series, including *Nine Signs*, *Northern Suite*, *Flying to the Moon* and *No Words*. These last two bodies of work contain 60 and 55 paintings respectively, the largest of which is 16 feet by 12 feet.

Koop's wrestling with scale is not arbitrary. She said in Ottawa on the weekend that she doesn't "paint big just to paint big. My art has to be bigger than I am, otherwise it's just an idea."

An opportunity to learn more about her artistic process comes Wednesday night in Toronto, with the premiere screening of Katherine Knight's documentary *Koop: The Art of Wanda Koop* at the opening of the Reel Artists Film Festival. What Koop paints is as varied as the surfaces on which she paints. In *Flying to the Moon*, she combined hockey masks with figures from the Beijing opera for a series of paintings that were unprecedented not only in Canada, but in the world. Her images are mobile, allowing one thing easily to become another. Distant shoreline fires grow to become a giant tear; a helicopter hovers in the air like a dollop of mercury; an attenuated yellow slit hangs in a monochromatic landscape in an exhibition of paintings and video included in her 2001 Venice Biennale installation, *In Your Eyes*.

Koop is a virtuoso painter who achieves a disproportionate depth from the application of very little pigment. Her interests are tonal, not textural. For a landscape, she may use 10 to 20 layers to create a painterly atmosphere that moves imperceptibly from pale blue to peachy orange. These are extremely deceptive paintings, and evidence that one of Koop's accomplishments is to hide just how deeply accomplished she is. *Tear* and *Flying to the Moon*—gold fish are rivetingly beautiful paintings, combining simplicity of form with intricacy of gesture in ways that create a space for mutual co-existence.

On the Edge of Experience includes a room called "In the Studio" filled with juvenilia, sketches, Post-it notes, photographs, studio objects, books and single-channel videos, as well as 14 maquettes, made by Steve Hunter. The maquettes recreate in miniature Koop's major exhibitions of the past three decades. It is a captivating space, a combined archive and living museum that is like being inside the artist's imagination. The room offers a rich insight into the creative process without minimizing its essential mystery. What it



Flying to the Moon—gold fish combines simplicity of form with intricacy of gesture. **BRUCE SPIELMAN**

illustrates is that from the beginning Koop's imagination has been fed by a variety of sources, especially her own work.

This omnivorous approach to art-making was nowhere more apparent than in the final room of the exhibition. *Hybrid Human* was made for this exhibition, and in it Koop combined large paintings, live dancers and recorded video to establish a visual connection between movement and image.

Koop has said she choreographs her work in the same way choreographers plan their movements, and in *Hybrid Human* she collaborated with Jolene Bailie to make evident that common inspiration. Five dancers move throughout the gallery space, both casting shadows and being reflections on the surfaces of five large works, which are at once full paintings and empty screens. It's a haunting hybridity.

Like everything else connected with this splendid exhibition, you can't take your eyes off it. Taken together, the painted, drawn and kinetic dimensions of *On the Edge of Experience* make it abundantly clear that in the quality and quantity of her work, Wanda Koop is the pre-eminent Canadian painter of her generation.

Wanda Koop: On the Edge of Experience continues at the National Gallery in Ottawa to May 15.

Special to The Globe and Mail

KOOP, PORCELAIN SEEDS AT REEL ARTISTS FEST

Sometimes the artistic process can be as illuminating as the art itself. Opening with the world premiere of a documentary on Winnipeg painter Wanda Koop, Toronto's Reel Artists Film Festival offers insight into artists at work – and a number of surprises along the way.

In one of the films, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is filmed walking on something almost incomprehensible: a hundred million tiny pieces of hand-crafted porcelain, all shaped and painted like sunflower seeds.

The effect must have been staggering for those who were also able to walk and frolic on the seeds in a corner of London's Tate Modern (before the museum had to cordon off the popular exhibit due to noxious dust from all the trampled seeds).

But the short film *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* not only takes viewers to the installation, it shows the artist talking in depth about the inspiration for the piece and documents the teams of skilled workers making the seeds in the city of Jingdezhen, the "porcelain capital" of China.

Like the best films in the Reel Artists festival, the documentary is itself a work of art with its quiet pace and beautiful photography, including

one of the loveliest shots in any film, of a young girl playing on her own, catching raindrops in her hand.

Other highlights of the festival include *Koop: The Art of Wanda Koop*, which takes us into how the artist sees her world, and *The Colour of Your Socks: A Year with Pipilotti Rist*, which follows the extroverted and eccentric Swiss artist as she works on various international exhibits.

What's most fascinating in these films, though, might be the will behind the art. The documentary *Aakideh: The Art & Legacy of Carl Beam* probes the enigmatic, deeply personal work and storied life of one of Canada's most important aboriginal artists.

Among the many other notable offerings at the festival are *Notion Motion* – Olafur Eliasson, about the Danish-Icelandic abstract artist's ingenious patterns using moving light and water, and *Damian Ortega: Do It Yourself*, about a Mexican artist who dismantles consumer objects (such as VW Beetles and Coke bottles) in ways that give larger insights into Mexican society.

The 8th annual Reel Artists Film Festival runs from Feb. 23 to 27 at Toronto's TIFF Bell Lightbox.

Guy Dixon