

## Wanda Koop

*On the Edge of Experience*, September 11 to November 21, Winnipeg Art Gallery



**Wanda Koop**, *Cherries from Paintings for Brightly Lit Rooms*, 1995. Acrylic on convertible car top fabric, 214.4 x 274.3 cm. Collection of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada (998.91). Photo: Bruce Spielman.

Wanda Koop is an important Winnipeg artist who, along with a few others in the late 1970s and early 1980s, took the unusual step of also becoming an entrepreneur. From the beginning she promoted herself as an artist through mailed proposals, a wide travel schedule, personal meetings with public and private gallery directors, and a no-nonsense attitude to the value of her art. Thirty years ago, very few avant-garde Canadian artists aside from General Idea (who were facetious about it) took the business of being an artist seriously – no doubt because of the mix of hippie hopelessness and pseudo-Marxism that saturated the art scene back then. Meanwhile, Koop's prosperous survival has inspired a generation or two of other risk-taking

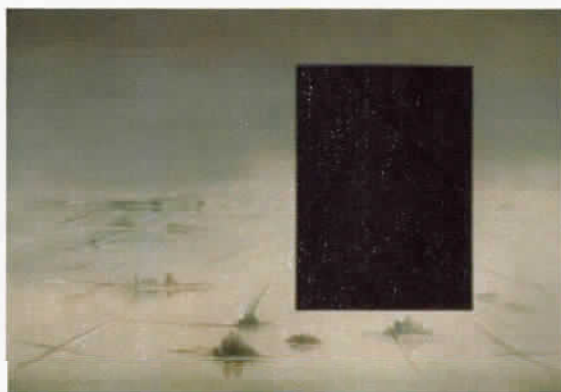
Winnipeg artists to bet on their own success.

Winnipeg does not have a set of styles that migrate down the generations, and Koop has no imitators. What has passed down though is a simple work ethic that, combined with cheap studio space, keeps Winnipeg in contention as a viable Canadian visual arts centre. There is a hankering for traditional media here that makes commercial success easier, but otherwise it's just, following elder examples, work, work, work for Winnipeg art bees.

Koop's art is the deserving subject of two autumn shows here a major traveling retrospective at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) which was memorably closed down by the police on opening night because of overcrowding, making her the envy of all artists – and a tighter, smaller show at Mayberry Fine Art, her local dealer.

There is not enough space here to address the years of work sampled in these exhibitions or give details about the innumerable subjects Koop has taken up since the beginning of her career – hockey, airplanes, cherries, gorillas, scopes and babies, to name just a few.

My favorite Wanda Koop paintings are her imaginary acrylic landscapes, examples of which appear in both the WAG and the Mayberry shows. Her watery, aerial views of futuristic cities include foggily defined buildings that shimmer amidst floodwaters and lakes. She perches little urban outcroppings on stream-form spits of land in these works. The best are the mid-sized works, about three or four feet high, likely the optimum size to perfectly match the drying time of the acrylic water-based medium's layers with the paint application time. Technically, these are complex paintings, with a layering technique not easily copied.



**Wanda Koop**, *Untitled, (Flood, black rectangle) from Green Zone*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 284 x 406.6 x 5.1 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (42207.44). Photo: Bruce Spielman.

As well, the surfaces of these landscapes are extremely delicate. I have long thought owners should immediately put them under plexiglass. Many viewers might not know how subtle these surfaces are, but once you do, it turns looking closely at them into an experience not unlike watching the last champagne flute being carefully put on the top of a pyramid of glasses. Sensations of fragility and luminescence dominate viewing of these extraordinary things.

Koop's cities-on-the-prairies paintings would be clean, bright visions of a Modernist future if they did not also allude to floods, those slow, creeping natural disasters that prairie people stare down every spring. In Koop's futuristic scenes, the floods are deliberate irritants, like the insects that crawl over fruit in Dutch still life paintings. Maybe this is her non-verbal message: look forward to more floods because of climate change, but don't despair, we'll have the technology to deal with it. As you might guess, I am making the case here for Koop as a Modernist painter, an artist who believes in the future.



**Wanda Koop**, *Untitled from Satellite Cities*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 124.5 x 213.4 cm. Courtesy of Granville Fine Art, Vancouver. Photo: Bruce Spielman.

Nobody who uses colour with the exuberance and joy of Wanda Koop can be accused of being dystopian, even if some statements put out on her behalf emphasize dark things like the dangers of surveillance culture and ecological disaster. As a person and as an artist, Koop is incapable of being pessimistic, a fact that is hardly contradicted by the occasional menacing masked hockey head, cross-haired riflescope or, in many paintings a single black existentialist figure standing before what could be depictions of gigantic paintings or cinema screens.

Mayberry Fine Art's Koop installation is a much more sedate affair. Mayberry is an Edwardian townhouse gallery that might remind art travelers of an uptown New York gallery like Richard L. Feigen & Co. If the WAG provides the stadium version of Koop, Mayberry gives us a private, more domestic view, one that includes a beautiful limited-edition book of canvas print reproductions of fanciful buildings called "Expovilion," and much else. A marker of the difference between the two installations is the inclusion of a 1980s masked hockey player painting at Mayberry. In the WAG's large entrance hall, a similar acrylic on plywood painting seem half the size as the Mayberry piece.

The contrast between the WAG and Mayberry shows highlights Koop as a telling example of both the heights and limits of stardom in contemporary Canadian art. The critical acclaim has always been there for her, albeit with some naysayers. We are used to solid critical reputations in our senior contemporary artists, but Koop's commercial success is unusual. The scale of many of her works which fit comfortably in a major museum space, but must be shoe-horned into most commercial galleries, is a telling reminder that Koop's ambition is still rare in a Canadian artist. The Canadian art scene, as I see it, is roughly where the American art scene was in the middle of the 20th century.