

## *Face to Face with Wanda Koop* Richmond Art Gallery exhibition essay by Deborah Koenker

It is late April and I am face to face with Wanda Koop in her studio in an inner city neighborhood of Winnipeg. We are peering through her front window at a van parked outside. The man at the wheel looks intently through a pair of binoculars, a German shepherd dog on the seat beside him. Koop tells me that he's probably an undercover cop doing surveillance work, then casually mentions that she herself could have been a detective; "I notice things". When this assertion is applied to Koop's production over three decades, it becomes an understatement. A highly attuned observer, Koop is committed to the job of witnessing, recording and presenting what she sees—or notices—whether that is through first hand experience or media reportage. Born on Lulu Island—Richmond, BC—when the delta of the Fraser River was primarily agricultural land, she is now firmly rooted in Winnipeg where she was raised. From Winnipeg, the center of Canada, Koop has traveled out into the world. Across North America, through China, Japan, Ukraine, Brazil, Europe and India, Koop is constant in her role as "a recorder of visual language"; (Koop). Using post-it notes, sketches, journals, photos, video and resource materials collected from streets, shops and landscapes of everywhere she's ever been, she charts these territories and brings the world back to her work. This research is carefully archived in nearly six-dozen file drawers in her studio. Surrounded by the particular prairie landscape that established her early career success, Koop continues to be best known for her landscape works; but Koop works the blurred boundaries between landscape, portraiture, the figure and abstraction. I'm in Koop's studio for a curatorial visit. Given Koop's prodigious production there is a lot of work to consider. Together we agree on a selection of heads spanning nearly 25 years: *Face to Face* at the Richmond Art Gallery.

Like her travels, Koop's palette runs a gamut that is luminous, at times ominous. From subtle earthiness to vibrant intensity, Koop's colour conveys a sense of light through her method of building a ground using multiple washes of transparent colour. Her acute colour sense is orchestrated to create a psychological impact on the viewer, whether through muted shades grounded in the genre of Western historical painting, or colour of dazzling brilliance. The subtleties of her range must also be influenced by Winnipeg; by the strange radiance of prairie light, and by winter, which can start as early as October and last through the drab brown of April. Shadows cast on snow, the subdued neutrals of the prairie in Fall or Spring—what seems to many to be a colourless landscape surely informs Koop's nuanced range. On the other end of the spectrum, the artist's brilliant chromatic shifts and inventive combinations point to an early encounter with visiting students from China, when Koop was a 17-year-old student at the University of Manitoba. Their vibrant use of colour, unusual to the young Koop, had an emotional impact that transcended her awareness of the history of China—the Great Wall, the Great March, Mao. The artist began to understand how colour transposed other aspects of the culture. This experience awakened a profound awareness of cultural difference and an enduring fascination with Asian culture.

Drawn to objects and images related to Asia, Koop began to seek out Chinese shops and neighborhoods in cities across Canada where she was exhibiting. The artist recalls a return flight to Winnipeg in the early 1980s when she unfolded onto her lap a spectacular set of paper cuts of Beijing opera personages, found in a shop on Spadina Avenue in Toronto. By the time the plane landed, the artist had envisioned her series of paintings based on these operatic characters, which she describes as representing the entire range of human emotion—"an MRI of the human psyche". She had an early intuition that China would become a major influence globally, an idea met with skepticism by her peers. Through Chinese opera, stylized over thousands of years, Koop found a vehicle to access China prior to ever traveling there. When Koop did travel to China in the mid 1980s, this first trip resulted in more than 500 pieces ranging from photos and sketches to major paintings and works on paper. Koop is recognized for her distinctive, concise notational style. There is a calligraphic quality to her direct, decisive brushwork that registers the influences of traditional Chinese ink painting, especially in *View from Here—Heads*, a series of ink drawings on paper from 2009. These images disrupt the tradition of the figure in landscape. Tentative as memories, these evocative landscapes float inside heads that suggest the serenity of the Buddha, the wisdom of Confucius, the evolution of the soul. These images conjure the ethereal aspect of self that isn't the physical self; the *psyche* of ancient Greek that shares its root with the Greek word for *butterfly* and *soul*. But just when our thoughts head to higher realms, the series morphs into images of clowns. Koop contends that it doesn't take much for the viewer to fill in the blanks—that landscape and portrait, in a way, are one and the same. We're looking at ourselves.

Just as her colour range extends from Winnipeg to China, Koop's subject matter is unrestricted. She assumes the freedom to go anywhere. How does one make sense of a body of work started in 1985—*Flying to the Moon*—that begins with characters from the Beijing opera and ends with a series of hockey mask portraits? *Hockey Heads*, a series of diptych paintings on plywood from 1986, was inspired by Jacques Plante, one of the most influential goalies in NHL history and the first to wear a mask. These white-masked portraits, eerily suggestive of ghosts—a classical image in Chinese culture—flow from the operatic portraits. When one considers the power of a mask to protect and transform, the progression is logical. Crucial to an

understanding of Koop's process is the interweaving of bodies of work and influences. In *Victim*, distinctly based on traditional Beijing opera imagery, there exists a remarkable visual link to some First Nations imagery wherein the frog is prominent. *Monkey King*, a popular figure in Chinese opera, is a shape shifter capable of 72 transformations, similar to Raven, the shape shifter and trickster of Pacific Northwest First Nations mythology. The very title *Flying to the Moon* suggests that the artist's mind is moving at the speed of a rocket, suggests an escape from the gravity of Earth toward the enigmatic, a flight of the imagination reaching toward a poetic sensibility, toward the very face of the man on the moon. An innocent study for a pink-faced baby morphs into *Baby Face*, an enormous pink head with one eyebrow knowingly raised—at once bald-headed man, Sumo wrestler, infant, and the face on the moon. Other works not selected for this exhibition include: *All the Men in Maclean's Magazine*—important men of the day portrayed as opera characters; an entire series of Indian goddesses; and heads based on Phrenology, the 19<sup>th</sup> century racially biased study of human skulls that used size as a measure of intelligence and moral character. Perhaps Virginia Woolf's premise that "the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him (her), must be incandescent," begins to explain Koop's fluid and prolific output (61). This incandescence exists as intelligence in the flow of Koop's work and her engagement with humanity. That Koop cares about people is particularly evident in the act of founding *Art City*, a store front art centre for inner city youth at risk; and through her involvement in other neighborhood revitalization initiatives and service to community, fundamental to the artist's Mennonite origins.

In the dockyards of Rotterdam Koop observed cargo ships from China being unloaded, "no more porcelain, only plastic"; the cranes and dockside machines suggestive of unmanned aviation vehicles and more—of "our willingness to be transformed by machinery, and perhaps even to become part machine"(Koop, statement). Our world is whirling with the transformations brought through technology. The hybridization of humans is already happening: we are wired. Our appurtenances are recorded in the series *Hybrid Human*, bringing the idea of transformation full circle. Increasingly life's conversations and transactions are not conducted face to face; rather, communication is mediated by technological interventions: computers and social networking systems like Facebook, chat rooms, Skype and Twitter; cell phones, iPods, hybridized computer languages and the virtual avatars of *Second Life*. In *Love and Sex with Robots*, one book in Koop's extensive library, author David Levy devotes chapter three to an examination of our deep attachment to personal technological devices. He predicts that in the future humans will fall in love with robots (Levy). Not an impossibility given Japan's burgeoning multi billion dollar robotics industry, a global leader in the areas of industrial robots and service-robots, including underwater, medical, cleaning, security, fishing, forestry, care-giving, entertainment and pet robots (McNicol). The cyborg—a hybrid of machine and organism—is no longer fantasy. Bionic eye implants have been successfully given to several previously blind people, enabling sight (Cheung). These video camera implants the size of a pea are capable of transmitting signals to the optic nerves, allowing basic black and white vision detecting motion and obstacles (Ibid). Koop records this artificiality on an emotional level. *Deep Bay Robots*, a series of gouache paintings on paper, conveys a sense of cheerful toxicity through the use of neon colour. These robots retain a figuration although they're constructed with a Cubistic, angular geometry. In one piece a plump, wired figure clutches a little globe, a sad, shrinking planet in crisis. Both are banded with latitudinal and longitudinal lines, inextricably connected. As the world becomes harder to make sense of, Koop questions where we are headed. The robot becomes a symbol of the artist's own unease: a kind of alien, a kind of alienation.

The theme of hybridism is sustained in the 2009 series *Bar Code Faces*, work that brings new meaning to the term 'face value'. Bridging landscape, portrait and commodity, a series of colour bars floats on each canvas above an ephemeral ground or a barely visible landscape. The bars initially read as a formal pictorial device—patches of colour that recede into the deep space of the canvas, or in some works hover on the surface. While formally referencing abstraction, these paintings acknowledge a transient figuration, simultaneously recording with the sparsest notation both face and bar code. These colour bars also appear in *Green Zone Face*, a series of paintings from *Green Zone*, an extensive body of work whose inception coincided with the start of the Iraq war in 2003. A pacifist in the Mennonite tradition, Koop watched the war on television, a sanitized reportage sans the raw images of the Viet Nam War. The US Military learned from its political mistakes in relation to media coverage of Vietnam, revising its policies accordingly to better manipulate public opinion on future conflicts. Consequently the coverage of Iraq is mostly banal, obscure; *Green Zone Face* presents a series of large, silhouetted heads. Abstract bands of colour replace eyes and mouth, rendering the subjects blind and mute, completely disempowered. The nod to Minimalism and Abstraction is present in this work, but the source of these bars is TV: the 'crawl' of news that moves across the bottom of the screen, the colour test screen for digital TV. Koop also uses the band as a formal device in some highly abstract recent works not included in this exhibition. Media images grabbed from TV, digitally printed and cut into strips are literally interwoven to create new, highly abstract works that are initially difficult to locate within the artist's oeuvre. Ever the explorer, Koop uses media not only as an information source, she also works in the medium of video. The elegance of the *Green Zone Face* portraits belies the complexity of what they represent—the whispered reference to the covered heads of

prisoners at Guantanamo Bay Detention Center and Abu Ghraib prison, the images that we see despite the US military's best efforts at prevention. Or perhaps they are portraits of us, mute and blind to the disasters of war.

In Koop's studio I pick up a slim volume of poetry: *Eunoia*, by Christian Bök. "Eunoia", Bök writes, "is the shortest word in English to contain all five vowels, and the word quite literally means 'beautiful thinking'" (103). Each of five chapters is limited to using words with a single vowel. A conceptual artist, Bök performs his writing. He has created artificial languages for two science fiction television shows, and is currently writing *The Cyborg Opera*. Koop didn't know these facts when she picked up *Eunoia*; she was attracted to the writing. The intersection of interests in the robotic and the operatic is uncanny. Koop is currently involved in a collaborative performance work with dancer Jolene Bailey. For a brief moment I imagine Bök and Koop meeting face to face, two 'beautiful thinkers', two poets, two rocket-minds. Through inventiveness, exploration and practice Koop has attained the maturity of an artist who trusts her own intuition. She offers the viewer what light-and-space artist Robert Irwin has insightfully described as 'an opportunity to pay attention'. In the final analysis the best understanding of the flow of Koop's work comes from the artist herself: "it's all the things I'm thinking about"--and all the things she notices with such acuity.

---Deborah Koenker

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