CAROLINE DUKES
A TEN YEAR SURVEY

GALLERY 1.1.1.
SCHOOL OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
NOVEMBER 22 TO DECEMBER 17, 1983

OPENING RECEPTION, NOVEMBER 22, 8:00 P.M.
FIG. 1 : LANDSCAPE #32, 1983
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INTRODUCTION
Caroline Dukes' paintings and drawings appear at first glance to locate themselves squarely in the tradition of Manitoba figurative and landscape painting. Ivan Eyre, Don Proch, Esther Warkov, and many others have explored the genre, each in his or her own unique way. Caroline Dukes brings to it her own blend of philosophies based upon a personal struggle which shapes her vision.

Unlike the artists mentioned above, Dukes' approach to this subject does not spring from a prairie background. Although she admits to being influenced by Ivan Eyre, the concepts and philosophies which form the basis of her work derive more from her European background than from her current environment. Growing up as part of the Jewish minority in Hungary during the Second World War, followed by years of living under the postwar Communist regime in that country, studying at the Academy of Fine Art in Budapest and finally emigrating to Austria and ultimately to Canada, Dukes draws from a background unlike that of any other Manitoba artist working with the elements of figure and landscape. She writes of the influence of her background on her early work:

I studied in the studio of a sculptor in Hungary during the hey-day of social realism. Sculpture meant then the repetitive depiction of smiling, happy soldiers, peasants, and workers with or without flags in their hands. This represented a heritage I rebelled against once I graduated from art school in Winnipeg and started to work on my own. Dreary or emotionless expressions seemed reality to me as I found the smiles phoney through those experiences. . . . I was troubled by the subjection of the individual to society’s forces and to the limitations imposed by the universal order, both chipping away from man’s freedom.

It is this background that provides the primary motivation of Dukes' early work, as well as strongly influencing the later landscapes and colour paintings.

THE WORKS
Caroline Dukes' drawings of nudes and torsos of 1973-75 possess many of the attributes of traditional figure studies. There are, however, even in these early works, evidences of formal and conceptual concerns which are simultaneously being developed in the more narrative paintings of 1973-76. A comparison of TORSO (fig. 4) and NUDE SERIES #4 (fig. 6), both of 1973, illustrates the development. The space in both drawings is shallow and confined; the figure an anonymous form held rigidly in the space by being anchored to both sides of the paper. The figure in TORSO is sculptural, recalling her cast stone sculpture of the same name of that year. In NUDE SERIES #4, however, the figure has become almost flat, existing as a low relief on the surface. The strong chiaroscuro within the form has been replaced by delicate hints of volume and gentle linear divisions between planes. The edge modeling which, in TORSO suggests the existence of non-visible side and back surfaces, has disappeared, and the softened edges have given way to a distinct break between figure and ground.

INTERIOR #1, 1973 indicates that Dukes was simultaneously developing these qualities in her paintings, here with strong narrative and surrealist overtones. A dominant formal structure and strong contrasts of light-dark and complementary colours, together with the undulating contour of the edge of the figure and curtain create an agitated quality that is supplemented by the near suspension of the figure in space, bound as it is by the connection of the feet to the red rug and imprisoned by the geometry of the interior. INTERIOR #1, 1973 goes farther into the area of personal psychological trauma than any of the interior series in spite of, or perhaps because of, its unsettling formal qualities.

UNVEILING (fig. 2), completed in the same year, is much more refined compositionally in its use of colour and form. The contrast between the organic forms of the figures and the simplified geometric forms of the interior is more pronounced, and the colour has moved toward the colder, more neutralized colours of the later paintings of this series, but without the strong feeling of alienation brought on by the subdued colour and the isolation of the figures characteristic of the later works. The quality of detachment, strengthened by the formal elements so clearly seen in NUDE SERIES #4 creates an environment in which the figures possess strong visual ties to one another and to their surroundings without emotional bonds between each other or between themselves and their environment. The unveiling is happening not on the wall but within each individual, a product of each individual's unique perception.

INTERIOR #11, UTOPIA (fig. 9) goes even farther toward the isolation of the individual. Dukes describes the painting as representing a society in which cloning is accepted as a part of
being. In this painting, the viewer can never identify in a direct personal and emotional way with the figures. They are always removed; impersonal symbols of human condition; expressions of humanity rather than of individual psychological trauma. They live in a haunting world of half life, possessing form but not substance, human attributes without human emotion, formal relationships without personal interaction. Suspended in time and locked into an unreal space, their timelessness and unreality render them impotent, incapable of any action on their own behalf and without the ability to engender emotion of a human kind in those who would try to enter the shallow stage upon which they play their parts. They are two-dimensional beings of three-dimensional persuasion, lacking in the essential human qualities that make control over their own destiny possible. Herein lies the power of the Interior Series. The figures are compelling expressions of the dilemma of humanity today, of social control and personal isolation. INTERIOR #11 is the most profound expression of this viewpoint.

In 1976, two developments occur in Dukes’ work. In one series, the figure is moved into the landscape. In a parallel series, geometric abstractions related to this figure-landscape appear. Both can be traced to the drawing LANDSCAPE #2, 1974 (fig. 3), where the simplified organic forms of hills and trees take on a biomorphic quality suggestive of figure forms.

From this beginning, paintings like LANDSCAPE #10, 1977 develop the landscape-figure, merging the two in a way that suspends and imprisons the fragments of figure in an unyielding formal structure which is a direct descendent of the 1973 drawings. Other drawings such as LANDSCAPE #12, 1976, place figures in this ambiguous space, culminating with the painting LANDSCAPE #15 of 1979 (fig. 14), where faint suggestions of massed figures become the foreground surface, and a threatening barrier of barbed forest separates them from the space beyond; a space that is made enchantingly seductive yet subtly threatening by the half hidden globe of the sun, a space that perhaps suggests some degree of hope for the future.

The geometric abstractions of this period, such as the drawing COMPOSITION #4, 1976, can be seen as a natural development of Dukes’ concern for the formal problems of two-dimensional space and three-dimensional illusion. As an exploration, they were perhaps a means of loosening the grip of the specific narrative content of the Interior Series. They are, however, lacking in the psychological connections to the human condition that is the backbone of her other work. The most successful are those which retain some connection to the figure-landscape ambiguity.

Out of the exploratory transitional period of 1976-77, another series emerges which leads directly to the colour paintings of today. The slight breaking down of edges and the strengthening of the texture in the primarily geometric drawing LANDSCAPE #5, 1977, becomes the eerie amorphous ambiguity of figure-landscape suggestion in the drawing LANDSCAPE #11, 1978, and the haunting envelopment of the drawing LANDSCAPE #24, 1981 (fig. 8), the most powerful of this group.

If we, the viewers, are forbidden entry to the closed space of the interior paintings, we find the ethereal world of the landscape drawings no more accessible. The closed structure of the interior paintings excludes through barriers of space and surface which function as a membrane of resistance to human participation in the drama which will never unfold, a drama that is locked into the permanence of art. The landscape drawings and paintings exclude through other means. Their insubstantiality is compelling, drawing us into an attempt to focus and locate, but at the same time providing us with no means by which we can render concrete the space and locate ourselves in our projection of it. We are left to float suspended in a world that is at once familiar and foreign, trapped in the twilight zone of physical insubstantiality, where everything is within our perceptual grasp yet nothing can be touched.

The sensuality that is so evident is evident in the interior series is the key to our undoing in the landscapes, for as the interiors are worlds of substance without emotion, the landscapes are emotion without apparent physical substance. They are worlds that can exist only in non-existence: dream states or fantasy, mirages which always fade before we reach them.

The last paintings go even farther. They entice with colour and space. The viewer is pulled into this intriguing world, then pushed to the surface again by the strength of the colour contrasts, the dynamics of the visual movement, and the texture of the brushwork. Dukes writes of these works:

... subconsciously I keep setting up situations of conflict between two elements in my work, as in LANDSCAPE #12, where matter/hill tries to reestablish the extent of its territory, while light is persistently invading it. Through this interaction they give form to one another, while keeping the tension as well. The conflict/tension present through my development could be the reason for the ambiguity, as well as the repetition of the same titles, which leaves the viewer to explain the intent.

... I try to project the invisible energy that connects earth, sky, water. My awe toward nature explains the spiritual quality of my later work. My most recent work deals with forms in nature and my perception of their “becoming” by being exposed to forces acting within and without. The bulk of forms is replaced by density of colour. The static quality of earlier work is taken over by movement.

This process of “becoming” is the essence of these works. They are powerful expressions of the dynamics of formation, of the never ending process of change and growth in nature and life. They are not comfortable, but that is their strength, for we can never truly enter into the majesty of it all. We can only stand in awe of its overwhelming power and of the painting that expresses it.

Dale Amundson, 1983
FIG. 3: LANDSCAPE #2, 1974

PHOTO: ERNEST P. MAYER
FIG. 8 : LANDSCAPE #24, 1981
FIG. 10: INTERIOR #6/Visit, 1975
FIG. 11: LANDSCAPE #30, 1982
FIG. 12: LANDSCAPE #37, 1983
FIG. 13: LANDSCAPE #27, 1981

PHOTO: ERNEST P. MAYER
BIOGRAPHY
Born in Hungary
Imigrated to Canada in 1958

STUDIES
Studio of Sigismund de Strobl, Hungary
Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary
School of Art, University of Manitoba

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1981 Fleet Gallery, Winnipeg
1980 Pollock Gallery, Toronto
1978 Fleet Gallery, Winnipeg
1976 Gilman Gallery, Chicago
1974 Fleet Gallery, Winnipeg

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1983 • Thomas Gallery, Winnipeg
  • The Colour Connection, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1982 • Collectors Cabinet, Winnipeg Art Gallery
  • Perspectives on Women in the '80s, Janet Ian Cameron Gallery, Winnipeg
1981 • Occurrences: Four Manitoba Painters, Winnipeg Art Gallery
  • Walleck Gallery, Ottawa
1980 • Gallery 1667, Halifax
1979 • Aspects of Realism, Pollock Gallery, Toronto
1978 • Graphex 6, Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford
1977 • Aspects of Manitoba Art, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1976 • The Mid-Western 1976, juried travelling exhibition
  • Manitoba Exhibition, XXI Olympiad, Montreal
  • Spectrum Canada, Montreal
1975 • Images of Women, Winnipeg Art Gallery
  • Changes: 11 Artists Working on The Prairies, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, travelling exhibition
  • Graphex 3, Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford
1974 • SCAN, Vancouver Art Gallery
  • SCA Exhibition, Shaw-Rimmington Gallery, Toronto
  • Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
1. THREE WOMEN, 1972
   oil on canvas
   61.0 x 61.0
2. UNVEILING, 1973*
   acrylic on canvas
   127.0 x 174.0
   private collection
3. INTERIOR #6/ VISIT, 1975*
   acrylic on canvas
   124.5 x 157.5
   Province of Manitoba Collection
4. INTERIOR #11/ Utopia, 1976*
   acrylic on canvas
   182.9 x 434.3
5. LANDSCAPE #12, 1978
   acrylic and oil on canvas
   40.6 x 55.9
   collection of Mr. and Mrs. R. Falby
6. LANDSCAPE #15, 1979*
   acrylic on canvas
   203.2 x 320.0
7. LANDSCAPE #30, 1982*
   acrylic on canvas
   160.0 x 330.2
8. LANDSCAPE #32, 1983*
   acrylic and oil on canvas
   167.0 x 198.1
9. TORSO, 1973*
   cast stone
   44.9 x 22.2 x 21.1
   Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery
   Acquired with the National Trust Fund No. 1
10. TORSO, 1973*
    pencil on paper
    57.2 x 38.1
    collection of Mr. and Mrs. B. Kaplan
11. LANDSCAPE #2, 1975*
    pencil on paper
    31.8 x 48.3
12. LANDSCAPE #12, 1977
    pencil and prismacolour on paper
    36.8 x 53.3
13. LANDSCAPE #20, 1980
    graphite on paper
    66.0 x 50.8
    Canada Council Art Bank Collection
14. LANDSCAPE #24, 1981*
    charcoal on paper
    63.5 x 93.5
15. LANDSCAPE #26/ MASADA, 1981
    charcoal on paper
    96.5 x 63.5
16. LANDSCAPE #32, 1982
    prismacolour on paper
    58.4 x 44.5
17. LANDSCAPE #34, 1983
    prismacolour on paper
    50.8 x 66.0
18. LANDSCAPE #35, 1983*
    graphite on paper
    58.4 x 73.7
19. LANDSCAPE #37, 1983*
    mixed media on paper
    63.5 x 96.5

*Reproduced in this catalogue

WORKS REPRODUCED IN THIS CATALOGUE
1982 NUDE SERIES #4, 1973
   pencil on paper
   31.8 x 47.0
   Bronfman Collection, Montreal
   Museum of Fine Arts
1981 LANDSCAPE #27, 1981
   acrylic on canvas
   182.9 x 144.8

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Detail Landscape #35, 1983