

Skin of the Earth



OBSERVING TIME IN THE RECENT PAINTINGS OF Karen Curry

by Donald Brackett

portrait



SKIN OF THE EARTH – VESSELS IV, 1999
ACRYLIC ON BIRCH, 28" X 40"



SKIN OF THE EARTH – VESSEL VI, 1999
ACRYLIC ON BIRCH, 28" X 40"

STRANGE IRONY: IN ORDER TO GRASP THE BEAUTY OF SOMETHING,
WE MUST IMAGINE IT DISAPPEARING,
AND APPRECIATE ITS ABSENCE.

landscape



SKIN OF THE EARTH – VESSELS III, 1999 ACRYLIC ON BIRCH, 28" X 40"

still life

The recent paintings of Karen Curry appear to merge the three distinct perceptual and aesthetic formats of portrait, still life, and landscape, in a manner hinted at in her past exploration of objects of containment: images of boats, buildings, shafts, stones, urns, and arches, usually painted on mahogany wood and occasionally rendered in the eminently self-contained and time-oriented media of fresco. But now, this triple experience of a single object is here handled more directly and less metaphorically, while still utilizing the very effective visual language of erosion and excavation which has become something of her signature style: sanding and scraping the surface to reveal the pigments and textures trapped beneath it. This process also emphasizes both the intrinsic energy of the vessels and the emotional state of the observer in relation to them.

The most accurate way to describe her new paintings, or our experience of them, could be as “skins” between the viewer and the interior spirit of the works. As the artist herself has remarked, “These vessels are made from the skin of the earth and are being slowly reclaimed by her.” As such they are also documents of time in its passage, through the earth, through the painted vessels, and through all of us. We are therefore reminded, in a subtle yet still disconcerting way, that we too are vessels. But for the containment of what ... we may never know. Perhaps what we contain, after all, is the very potential to transcend our vessel itself. Or perhaps what we contain is the potential, demonstrated by an artist such as Curry, to embody ideas.

But knowing and certainty are not her subjects. She is far more concerned with the mystery manifested by being here at all, not necessarily by the meaning of that manifestation. Her gaze is equally attracted to both natural and built vessels, and in some cases, blurs the distinction between the two in an arresting manner. Time is the element being arrested and observed in these delicate and deceptively simple paintings, mostly in acrylic on birch, with their bleached light, subdued colour and almost exhausted surfaces. Time is also evident in the constant presence of shadows cast by the forms, often as solid as the objects casting them, and merging with other shaded shapes to create the virtual domain of the picture: a shadow dimension hidden within our own, yet possibly even more real than our own.

They are therefore metaphysical portraits, still lifes, and landscapes, wherein the subject shows its intimate face, the immediate environment beneath it, as well as the distant horizon behind it. All the “bodies”, or vestiges of bodies depicted, permit a representation of both entropy and engagement. Strange irony: in order to grasp the beauty of something, we must imagine it disappearing, and appreciate its absence. Thus, though they reveal little of the personal environments in which they are situated, her vessels are nonetheless “environmental” in nature and spirit, suggesting a fragile existence of which we form only a small portion, but which we are entirely responsible for protecting. While we often speak of “escaping by the skin of our teeth”, surely we must avoid escaping ... by the skin of the earth.

Another aesthetic evolution is also evident in a certain refinement of pictorial sensibility, from the earlier ribbed and somewhat anthropomorphic boat-forms and urns, to these new and far more enigmatic structures. Whereas before we were viewing apparent artifacts which “stand-in” as emblems of ourselves, now we are viewing more organic and inexplicable forms which, though they still might contain or support something hidden in their essence, now stand only for themselves. This isolation from us is both endearing and liberating, and somehow draws us even closer to a mystery that not only can not quite be penetrated, but which we might be prohibited from penetrating by some unseen law. I am reminded of the way in which North American native cultures raise a burning pipe toward the sky in praise of “The Mystery”. Apparently only the more recent and youthful cultures such as ours are quite so obsessed with “solving” mysteries. Curry’s “Vessel Series” are smoldering images held aloft in a similar manner, pointing to but not trying to eliminate, our mystery.

These recent works also signal a shift toward evermore ethereal means of depicting the act of embodiment. Visual economy and elegance are the technical and emotional means with which she continues an ongoing dialogue with the portrayal of what I like to call “ineffable entities”. By focusing on only a small number of these entities, she nevertheless suggests that they are perhaps infinite in number, as are we entities viewing them, each in our personal shadow dimension, each in our own private way.

Donald Brackett

(Donald Brackett is a Toronto-based art critic whose writing has appeared in Canadian Art, the Globe and Mail, and Art in America.)



“THESE VESSELS
ARE MADE FROM
THE SKIN OF THE
EARTH AND ARE
BEING SLOWLY
RECLAIMED BY
HER.”

Karen Curry

SKIN OF THE EARTH – VESSELS VIII, 1999 ACRYLIC ON BIRCH, 36" X 48"



STUDY – SKIN OF THE EARTH B, 1999
ACRYLIC ON BIRCH, 12" X 12"

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Front cover:

Skin of the Earth
Vessels VII, 1999
acrylic on mahogany
36" x 60"



SKIN OF THE EARTH
VESSELS III, 1999 – DETAIL

Karen Curry is a Toronto-based visual artist. Currently self-represented, she works predominantly in the mediums of painting and lithography. Since 1993 she has spent part of each year living and working in Vancouver. She has exhibited widely in solo and group shows. Recent group exhibitions include: "The Boat Show, Canadian Artists – A Nautical Look", Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, North York, 1996; "Fresco Series 1996", Castello Di Ceri, Ceri, Rome, Italy, 1996; "Glo", Archive, Toronto, 1997; "Plein Air", Station Gallery, Whitby, 1998.

Her work is in numerous public corporate and private collections including: Ernst and Young, Esso Canada Resources, Falconbridge, Four Seasons Hotel, Hewlett-Packard, Pan Pacific Hotel, Prior Editions Ltd., Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, The Investment Funds of Canada, University of Alberta Hospital and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

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