

Strange Cartographies: the Paintings of Carol Rhodes

See the World, Glasgow International 2021, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum

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I first encountered the work of Scottish painter Carol Rhodes (1959 – 2018) at the London gallery, Alison Jacques in May 2021. It was a sunny afternoon, not long after the easing of the latest lockdown, and I was freely roaming the city for the first time in ages. For me, Carol Rhodes' work will be forever associated with this era, a time characterised by an ongoing global pandemic and my gradual adjustment to a changed world after a devastating loss.

The artist paints fictitious scenes, fusions of industrial and natural terrains, and her solo show at Alison Jacques moved and intrigued me. Her oil paintings often lack a horizon line, her forms veer towards abstraction and the colours of her landscapes are quite unlike those of the living world - purples and pinks, pastels, shades of grey. They are not wholly unnatural, sometimes they are almost bodily - the roads and runways can be read metaphorically as

wounds. There's no trace of those figures that made the incisions, blasted the rocky ground with dynamite, forcing entry, paving over soil and sand. There is a sense of ambiguity and disorientation in her work that chimes with my experiences of bereavement and lockdown isolation.

The news that there was an upcoming exhibition of her drawings and paintings at Glasgow International (GI) was one of the catalysts for a trip north several months later. Entitled *See the World*, this presentation at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum was the first major survey of Rhodes' work in her native Scotland since her death from motor neurone disease at the age of 59. Rhodes' work is an apt choice for the theme of the 2021 iteration of GI - *Attention* - demonstrating as it does the painter's attention to her materials and thematic concerns, as well as the viewer's attention to the works on paper and canvas, their relatively small size an invitation to close looking.

The exhibition features early works whose focus and specificity (paintings of a tent, of an aeroplane, of a caravan) sets them apart from Rhodes' later landscape works. We find similar voids, colour palettes and interest in place, but explored and rendered in a

markedly different way. As a survey of the artist's work, the choice of paintings and drawings at the Kelvingrove offers a strong sense of her enduring interests, working methods and artistic development in the 90s and early 2000s. The inclusion of many pencil studies and sketches is a testament to the important place of drawing within her practice. In an interview published in a 1998 exhibition catalogue, Rhodes says:

I get an idea, a notion or a feeling that on the one hand is extraordinarily vague but it has got a very strong core. Then I look through a lot of different photographs in the books I've got in the studio and flesh that out, little bits from different images, it can be tiny portions from a huge array of different photographs. Then I pin down the thing that was in my mind and spend a lot of time drawing it out. (Carol Rhodes: interview with Pat Fisher).

At first glance, the artist's paintings appear to be topographical studies, aerial views, combining elements of the natural world and the built environment. But these are strange places, composite images in which human beings are absent and the colour palette is unusual. Themes of alienation, absence and displacement are woven through Rhodes' practice. We are held in a state of uncertainty when we look at her

paintings, which present familiar places made peculiar, or strange spaces made to seem familiar.

Rhodes does not paint people. She collages the real and the imaginary, drawing from a range of source materials such as photographs and sketches to create invented landscapes that bear recognisable traces of the world but make no claim to representation: they are ‘densely descriptive of the world, but you would not call them naturalistic’ says Merlin James in his essay ‘Earth/Body/Painting’ (James 2007, p.85). He continues: ‘The oddness of the world is everywhere celebrated, even exaggerated’ (James 2007, p.85-6). This oddness is apparent in paintings such as *Rock with Helipad* (1998) and *Breach* (2005), images that possess a distinctive, unsettling aesthetic. This is emotional, psychological cartography - a mood permeates these pictures of places: a place becomes a cipher for a state of mind or being.

There are no people in these paintings. There’s evidence of humans, discernible in the straight roads and angular buildings, but a stillness

pervades the scenes, which seem very remote, cut off, but suggestive of connection to other places - the roads often lead to the borders of the visible, they continue out of sight. The images are without a clear sense of perspective. As Andrew Mummery, Curator of Carol Rhodes’ Estate observes: ‘Rhodes was not interested in employing traditional single point perspective in her paintings but instead played with distortions of it and would use more than one viewpoint in a single painting’ (Mummery 2021). This artistic method of deploying multiple perspectives contributes to the viewer’s sense of having lost one’s bearings. In the foreword to a monograph¹ published in 2007 John Leighton insightfully remarks: ‘We are not quite sure what we are seeing’ (Leighton 2007, p.5).

There is a lunar paleness in *Rock with Helipad*, an apparent void in the lower half of the composition, and a ‘rock’ that could just as easily be the shell of an Atlantic horseshoe crab washed up on a beach. Roads bisect the frame, travelling inwards from the edges. There are buildings attached to them, but there’s a lack of depth and

¹ This volume, published to accompany an exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery of

Modern Art, Edinburgh, contains perceptive essays by art critic Tom Lubbock and by artist and writer Merlin James.

scale. Rhodes' pictures have their own interior coherence and harmony, the titles impart meanings and familiarity. The images speak to something preverbal, sparking memories of encountering spaces before habit hardened the mind into grooves of predictability, the expected overshadowing the actual, until what you see is what you expect to see, until there's only a rare surprise in a world that used to be so full of the new and the unknown.

As a book review published in the British Art Journal suggests, Rhodes' work as a committee member of Glasgow's artist-led Transmission Gallery (as well as her engagement with women's politics and nuclear disarmament campaigns) was an important focus for the artist: 'Much of her time was devoted to political and social issues, before in 1990 painting became the central activity of her life.' Rhodes' wide-ranging interest in the world is evident in her work, and the Kelvingrove exhibition offers some of the artist's source materials as documentation of this engagement. Books with titles like 'Rocks and the Landscape', 'The Cities of the USSR'

and 'Modern Architecture of Northern England' are displayed in a glass vitrine. These, alongside the many drawings, studies and sketches on view, give fascinating insight into the artist's process of composition and some of her visual and conceptual influences.

We can see the impact of aerial photography, the bird's-eye view, on her work. Tangled systems of highways and urban infrastructure are comparable to waterways and geological forms. In his essay 'Making It Up', Tom Lubbock refers to Rhodes' subjects as: 'imaginary landscapes. Maybe they're not strictly landscapes, if that word implies a grounded vantage point. Maybe they are not imaginary in the fullest sense, either. Fictional views or fictional topographies might be better terms for these scenes, seen from above, set somewhere in the middle of nowhere' (Carol Rhodes monograph, p.7). Lubbock refers to the environmental writings of Marion Shoard and her conception of *Edgelands* to situate Rhodes' landscapes as a kind of conceptual no man's land, a liminal zone.

Responding to a question in an email correspondence² on how the

² Citing email correspondence between C Foulkes and Andrew Mummery, Curator of Carol Rhodes'

Estate, with the kind facilitation of Alison Jacques gallery, June 2022.

artist's works relate to the history of landscape painting, Andrew Mummery says: 'She was interested in the social and political, as well as the artistic, history of landscape and her library contains a number of books on these subjects.' Carol Rhodes was born in Edinburgh, spent her childhood in India and returned to Britain in early adolescence. Could this biographical fact, these early displacements, have something to do with Rhodes' perceptive sensitivity and her subject matter? Indeed, the artist suggests that this is the case - according to Alison Jacques gallery, she notes: 'My early experience of India (its colours, density of detail), and then the estrangement from it, has informed my work in incalculable ways' (Carol Rhodes artist bio, Alison Jacques gallery).

When a painter chooses a small board or canvas, they know you will need to step up close to look at it. Likewise, a large work warrants distance. Your position in relation to a thing affects your perception of it. In a statement from unpublished lecture notes, Rhodes refers to her process of composition:

I do dozens of drawings and eventually work on the size that fits the composition [...] Because I have the drawing, it gives me a

freedom to intuit the colours and tones to hang on to the skeleton of the composition. Of course, the weight of the composition changes during the painting, that's part of the painting's movement. (Courtesy of the Carol Rhodes Estate).

The paintings therefore emerge from a lengthy process of sketches and revisions, comprising the creation of concise blueprints and more intuitive work with colour. Rhodes' small-scale paintings prompt you to come physically near to them. Their content also testifies to the artist's own attentiveness to the work of others: Mummery claims that Rhodes 'had a particular fondness for fourteenth century Sienese painting and the court art of the Indian Mughal empire, but also looked closely at the work of artists such as Poussin, Corot and Stubbs'.

I'm sure I would've been struck by these paintings at any time, admiring their unique palette and blend of estrangement and serenity, but to come across them amid the grief of 2021 was to feel a profound sense of recognition. Rhodes' paintings remind me of the sort of dream in which you find yourself in a house that is your home in the context of the dream but not the one known to you in waking life. It may not be identifiable

as the *actual* place, but emotionally you know its contours.

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Statement from unpublished lecture notes (date unknown). Courtesy of the Carol Rhodes Estate.