



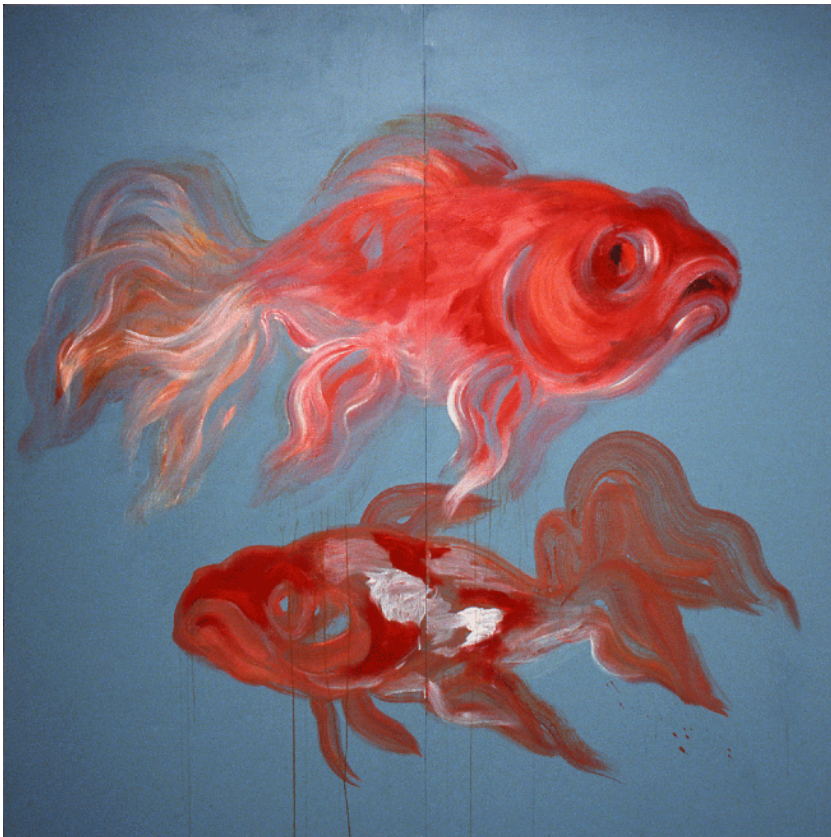
Robert Enright, "Review: Wanda Koop," *Frieze*, June 1, 2011

frieze

Wanda Koop

National Gallery of Canada

BY ROBERT ENRIGHT



Wanda Koop, "Flying to the Moon - Gold Fish (detail)," from the series *Flying to the Moon*, 1987.

In his 1947 book *Call Me Ishmael*, the American poet Charles Olson argued that the birthright of being born in North America was a claim on SPACE, which he wrote in upper case letters because, as he said, 'it comes large'. In the presence of all that space, the artist could either dig down for protection or climb on for the ride. For the Winnipeg-based painter, Wanda Koop, whose 20-year survey, 'On The Edge of Experience', filled four generous galleries at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, space is the whale that gets



swallowed up. (The exhibition was co-organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery from which it toured to Ottawa.)

Koop has been making art for 40 years and over that period of time she has been consistently attracted to working in series. This is less where she set out than where she ended up; for her painting a single work is a generative activity. There is something almost rapacious about Koop's production: for ten years she painted on 2.4-metre-square sheets of plywood and made series after series, including 'Building in the Pool of the Black Star' (1981), 'Reactor Suite' (1984), 'Flying to the Moon' (1987) and 'No Words' (1991). The 'Black Star' series comprised 44 metres of paintings installed in a circular horizon line in the Manitoba Legislative Building; painted a year before the Chernobyl disaster, 'Reactor Suite' was a four-part, 20-metre-long nocturnal dystopia of cooling towers, a nuclear submarine, a blue heron and a pair of figures emerging from deep blue water; 'Flying to the Moon' and 'No Words' comprised 60 and 55 large paintings respectively. At the beginning of the second Gulf War Koop began what has become her most ambitious project yet: 'Green Zone' (2004–ongoing) now numbers more than 300 works in various sizes. The series reflects both the content of the war and the way it was delivered through television: the paintings are haunted by residual bits of technology; the text scrolls that run on the bottom and sides of a TV screen become colourful lines of abstract interference and the images, whether people or tanks or skylines, suffer the indignity of image break-up. In scale, number and intensity, 'Green Zone' is unequalled in contemporary art as a response to the Gulf War (42 of the paintings have been acquired by Canada's National Gallery). It remains a startling achievement.

Koop has reached the point where she is generating work out of her older art. Instead of an exercise in entropic cannibalism, this self-feeding results in an ongoing register of the transformative possibilities of applied observation. Individual paintings talk to one another from body of work to body of work; the distant fires that glow on the riverbanks in a painting like Native Fires (1987–9) grow to monumental size and assume the shape of a huge tear drop in Tear (1996). In 'Sightlines' (2000), a series that developed from seeing the world through the eyes of a fighter pilot, the ovals and slits that decorate the canvas are also entry points through which massive destruction can be unleashed. What makes this body of work



so powerful is that it combines Koop's insatiate looking with an acutely developed skill in mark making and a refined sense of tone. In her hands and on her surfaces, the rendering of an ugly war can be beautiful.

When it suits her, Koop is capable of employing an audacious palette, especially in 'Flying to the Moon' in which she combined fractured characters from the Peking Opera with eerie figures who wear versions of professional hockey masks. Even with their colour and drama, these paintings were undeniably disconcerting, as if the cultural and pictorial hybridity at their core was flirting with the monstrous. In response to this sinister dimension, Koop also included works of undeniable lyric grace like her gold fish, which swim on the painted surface with the inviolate certainty of the figures on Keats's Grecian urn. But her paintings don't play to a sensual ear and their message gets distorted into something closer to, 'Truth is beauty, beauty is ugly.'

Since 'On the Edge of Experience' was a survey and not a retrospective, the National Gallery was able to accommodate only a small portion of Koop's prodigious output from even that two-decade period. For this artist, the notion that less is more is not as appealing as the recognition that more is not enough, so she designed a Studio Room that included models of 14 of her exhibitions, as well as drawings, small paintings, videos, objects and notes. The room is a living archive and is like being inside the artist's imagination. It is a haiku when compared to the epic of her practice, and is a compelling reminder of her formidable vision. Canada has a number of significant painters, historically and currently. Koop's distinguished career allows her to occupy both of those categories in the here and now.