



**"An Interview with Wanda Koop," *Whitehot Magazine*, May 2018.**

*Noah Becker's*

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*of contemporary art*

## **An Interview with Wanda Koop**

By WM Staff, May, 2018



*Wanda Koop, Gorilla, 2018, acrylic on canvas 20h x 16w inches. Courtesy of Arsenal Contemporary.*



A preeminent figure in contemporary Canadian art, Wanda Koop has been making waves stateside recently for her au courant paintings of silhouetted skylines that comment on the intersection between urbanism and the natural world.

We had a chance to speak with the artist about her current exhibition, *STANDING WITHSTANDING*, on view at [Arsenal Contemporary NY](#) in New York City until June 17th.

**You began painting at the age of 19. When did you know you wanted to be a professional artist?**

I was lucky enough to know I would be a painter at eight, as if I was born with a paintbrush in my mouth. Early repression and dyslexia, coupled, made it so that I had no other choice than to be an artist.

**When did you begin working with landscapes and nature? Did anything in particular inspire this choice?**

When I was younger, I was insatiable in terms of experiencing the landscape first hand - my partner and I travelled to the North and we would paint in plein air, from our van, across the North and Canada. I would pin up work in the plywood walls of the van which carried us and at nighttime, the air would become so moist so that the paint would stay wet for days. This may have been one of the early instances wherein I became interested in the porous border between water and its representation through painting, both being elemental substances for me. This time also gave me a deep knowledge of being in an environment and the experience of having to translate something as fleeting as memory, time, experience, into a kind of personal lexicon, my own visual iconography.



*Wanda Koop, Capitol, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 108h x 80w inches. Courtesy of Arsenal Contemporary.*



### **How did the Unseen series begin?**

The works, like their preceding series *In Absentia*—in which I unfolded the NY skyline through time as reflected in changing colors, as the absences and presences of the New York city grid in the air—was about energy. While *In Absentia* describes peoples and cultures without ever showing a person, *UNSEEN SEEN* suggests a subtle exchange of energy, with wobbled rainbows of color evoking natural rhythms in the world like acoustic vibrations, microwaves, and atomic reactions. As colors arc across canvases, tumbling like flares, I describe the mutability of paint and water. Both substances are forever changing, delighting, and granting new life.

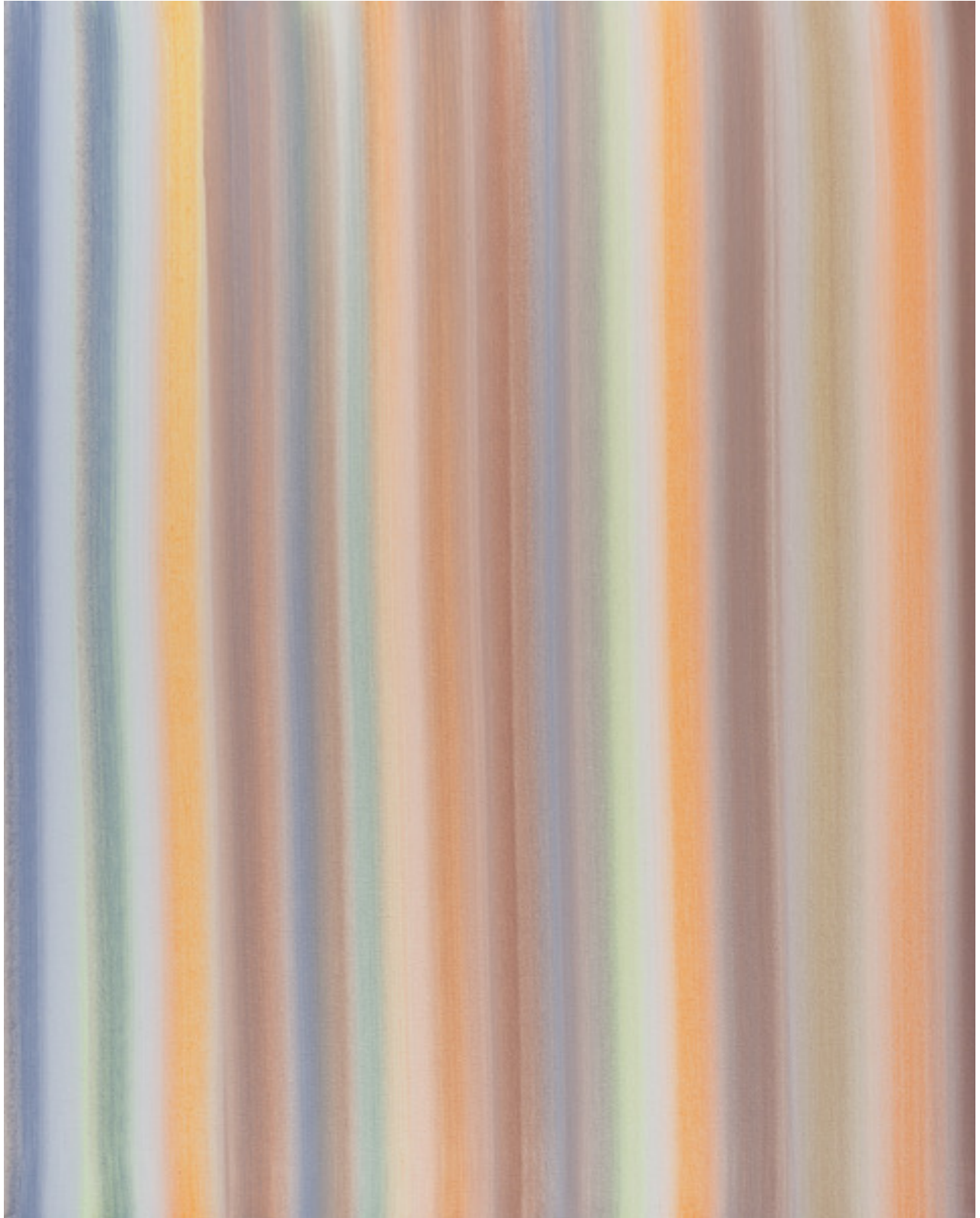
### **The process of your paintings transforming from a small sketch into a large-scale work is quite complex. Could you explain how this process works? Where does your source imagery come from?**

Like some kind of mad scientist, I'm constantly making notes and gathering data from the world around me, ready to intervene. My paintings often begin as post-it notes, the ones I doodle while watching tv or aboard a ship or on a plane, things that need to be secured in a visual language quickly and with minimal information. At the same time, I'm constantly taking photos, filming, and drawing - finding new ways to articulate my observations visually. The process is interminable and the elastic nature scale reflects this, making smaller works that eventually lead up in size. If, after say a year, I'm still interested with an articulation, an image I create, I can take it to another level.

My large paintings are equally as intimate as their smaller precedent, since they physically invite the viewer in. I would never paint a large painting just to see it at this new scale. Because I create the large works on the floor, I dance them and each mark becomes a movement within a more intricate choreography. Because of this, I don't paint a painting I can't physically paint.

### **What inspires the color choices used in your work?**

I've been studying color from when I started making art. Color is the main motivator for my paintings. Even if I make a sketch or a photo, it's thought of in color and I'm using it consciously. There's an article I read years ago about how the blind see, which struck me. I'm painting as something I see in my head, through these vivid colors, not as it exists in the world.



*Wanda Koop, Colour Bands, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 20h x 16w inches. Courtesy of Arsenal Contemporary.*



**How does your work with new technologies play a role in your painting style?**

My work *has* to deal with technology because my paintings deal with the world as we know it and as I experience it. My interest with technology really begins through the televised experience of the Gulf War - this was a novel experience of mediation, watching grossly personal and life changing circumstances from a perpetual outside, from aircrafts and through viewfinders. During this time, we were compelled to experience war from a deeply saturated television screen so that even the advertising felt like it was a continuation of militaristic events.

Because of the digital break up of the feeds provided to us, and because of all the interventions we experienced before seeing the image on the tv, I began to focus first on mediation. At the same time, information became denser on television with banners, text, newsreels on top of newsreels and I pushed against this, a liquidated and natural distillation of something like chaos. My paintings took into account these layer of scrim, the things we see before the image we are presented.

**You founded Art City in Winnipeg in 1998 to help bring art to inner-city youth. Would you say your work with indigenous children at Art City influences your work as an artist?**

Winnipeg is deeply indebted and connected to its Indigenous population. I took as my goal in opening Art City to connect the art community to the diverse communities in Winnipeg, It comes as no surprise then that 70% of Art City's visitors and participants are First Nation.

I've lived along the Assiniboine and Red River throughout my entire life, and the first Nations people have always held bonfires across the riverbank and I've returned to this particular horizon as a gathering of political power, corporate power, and then these fires reflecting in the river, cutting through time. The exhibition at Arsenal Contemporary also reflects the changes in our environment, changes we've created - not things done to us. It was important for me to look at the creation of pipelines, literal connectors between my home country of Canada and the US, where I was exhibiting. The work also became about what we owe the land, a form of knowing indebted to Indigenous population who are the first to be affected by our resolve to extract oil, despite all obvious consequences.



*Wanda Koop, North Dakota, 2017, acrylic on canvas 16h x 20w inches. Courtesy of Arsenal Contemporary.*

**You've had a very long and successful career in Canada prior to your recent recognition from American audiences. Do you attribute this newfound attention in the United States to anything in particular?**

I became very excited by painters like Georgia O'Keeffe and Emily Carr in art school and felt I could approach my painting from another perspective - as a subject of my own time. That I didn't have to look to NY, say, but inside myself and the world directly around me with the knowledge of the history of painting more generally and Canadian painting's history. I'm thrilled to have new sites in which to present my work, at Night Gallery in LA, at Arsenal Contemporary in NY, but would continue to be painting diligently in Winnipeg had those opportunities never presented themselves. This newfound





attention, as you say, means that a larger audience gets to see what I would be otherwise still creating.

**Is there any advice you would give to young painters just starting out?**

There was a time in Canada in which painting seemed to have been labeled dead, news that reached me late and which I wasn't too keen on accepting. Attention turned, in an almost absolute sense, towards conceptual photography. Strikes against me included being in Winnipeg, being a woman, and being a painter. But I had to paint, this much I knew. If you have to paint - paint. **WM**