

BORDERCROSSINGS

Fine Lines

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By: Robert Enright

Wanda Koop, one of Canada's most distinguished painters, has always been able to find ideas in the work she has already done that suggest ideas she might develop in what she is about to do. That connection is particularly apparent in the "Sky-Line Paintings," a new series that developed out of a four month-long stay in New York City from January through May of this year. *Spill*, 2013, a 78 x 110-inch acrylic on canvas, was the springboard into 10 subsequent paintings which settle on the diminishing line between representation and abstraction. It sets up a perceptual field that is equally about painting and being.

Spill shows a trio of black three-sided shapes that start at the top of a modulated warm sand-coloured ground and then drip to various depths of the canvas. Seeing them as top-end marks is one way to read the painting; another is to see them as black openings through which space is insinuated but not declared. Koop realized her top-down composition could open rich spatial possibilities.

She found her subject literally outside her window; the room she rented on the 17th floor of a hotel looked onto the site where the World Trade Centre had been and where the Peace Tower now is. She filled four sketchbooks, drawing in bed. Then she went to her Brooklyn studio, which had the same view as her hotel room but from the other side of the East River. Working this tale of two locations, she produced 100 drawings and 30 paintings. The buildings she was seeing lost their specific character and turned into archetypes, structures that embodied the experience of looking.



Some of the paintings are untitled, while others carry a parenthetical naming that describes a time of day and its accompanying palette. In *Sky-Line (Sunset)*, the soft sherbet orange of the sinking sun shifts to a transparent blue; the colours open up spaces separating three monolithic buildings. In *Brilliant Orange*, the descending shapes could have been made by Clyfford Still if he'd had a subtler and less craggy touch. Then in *Soft Blue* the buildings have disappeared and what we see at the top of the painting are minimal blue lines and reduced geometric forms. The painting also includes a smudged lighter blue that Robert Motherwell would have admired.

But for all their engagement with a modernist painting trajectory, these beautiful, emotionally laden works promise a depth of light (from as many as 10 different layers) that makes you think of Monet and his cathedrals. The experience of seeing them is to watch paint become atmosphere and atmosphere become meditation. In this case, the meditation represents an inquiry into our very existence. "I was looking

at New York from that perspective,” Koop says about her vantage point, a space forever haunted by 9/11. “What I was searching for was that fine line between something that is there and not there, whether buildings or people. I’m trying to paint that very fragile state of being.” ■