



Rosemont Art Gallery



Mapping the Land and Body

The land is the body and the body is the land, such is the central theme of Marsha Kennedy's fifteen paintings of life-sized nude figures. An artist born and brought up in Regina, Saskatchewan, Kennedy queries where does the land end and the vestiges of humanity take over? Physically faking to make, these large paintings are the creations of Kennedy's strength in mid-life and her commitment to the land, people and place that she has always known and loved. Painted on canvas, fifteen undidolized female and male nudes stand floating amidst a field of gold leaf. Painted in dark earth-colored oil glazes, the figures are monumental and covered with overlays of maps, scientific diagrams and texts, and bearing skulls and bodies of animals. These figures symbolize the humanity that settles and tills the land; it is humanity that spreads pesticides, kills precious creatures, even themselves, and yet also celebrates the sublime majesty of the land.

The multiplicity of themes underlying the overarching subject in Kennedy's work is complex. Some of these intertwining themes are concerned with ecology, spirituality, alchemy, museology and politics, though perhaps essential to understanding the paintings is the sense of embodiment. These images are embodiment in the literal sense of becoming corporeal and giving visible form to the unseeable and the abstract, but it is also "a term that collapses the duality of mind and body essentially infusing the body with the mind"¹. When Descartes declared the separation of mind and body in the seventeenth century, the empirical mind began to overshadow the workings of the spiritual to form a rational world. But the modern ideals of rationality and progress have not served the land well. Modern humanity was insensitive to the creatures surrounding our communities and we sought to take more than what the land could bear. Kennedy argues that we are not distinct from the land and its creatures anymore than our bodies are separate from our minds. This is expressed through these physiological diagrams that state the facts, the geography and the history of the relationship of humanity to the land and how the two have mutually affected one another in Saskatchewan and elsewhere. Humanity embodies the land, and just as we have abused the land, we have done harm to ourselves. Clearly Kennedy's work voices the need for ecological holism through the theme of embodiment.

How harming the land, harms ourselves is exemplified in Leaf Storm, the first painting in the series. Standing with her head bowed, the woman's hands are joined in a triangle over her genital area that shows the stoma of a plant. The function of the stoma negotiates between the plant and the surrounding environment; it is the gateway to life. All over the woman's body are molecular diagrams of chemical pesticides that are used in Canadian agriculture, which increase farm production, but when absorbed into the human body they can mimic estrogen, causing an imbalance that possibly leads to cancer. Pesticides used in farming are similar to estrogen, an essential element of human fertility, for they possess a double-edged sword as givers of life, but can also be poisons. The painting is visual testimony to the innocence of human progress that unwittingly destroys as it procreates.

If there is destruction in the past and present, then how do we negotiate our future with the land? Kennedy attempts to answer this with an image of an adult male, Great Plains Wolf, grasping a baby whose face is covered with the skull of a wolf. The adult body bears the shape of the vertical shape of a map of Saskatchewan marked by highways and grid roads, which are the arteries of human activity that have destroyed the natural habitat of the wolf and other animals. It is only the baby whose body is not marked with traces of human civilization and returns the gaze of the audience that is intervened by a wolf skull. Behind the skull of the wolf held up by the adult hand, the baby is shielded and protected. According to Kennedy, the skull is not only symbolic of the protective qualities of the natural world, but it acts as a lense that transforms ordinary sight into visions of the primeval. Thus the child is one who is unscathed by civilization and has a primeval vision of the land and all its creatures. Not only do these paintings visualize the history of the land and humanity, Kennedy's images speak to the future, which she believes lies in reclaiming the primordial.

Kennedy prominently displays the human body as specimens illustrating the history of the interaction of the land and its inhabitants. Each body is isolated on an unarticulated background of transformative gold; the body is to be examined and

displayed much as butterflies and insects preserved in a museum. The audience is asked to inspect the traces of human behavior and reflect on the meaning of progress since the Western Enlightenment that divided the mind from the body and sent European explorers to seek out and tame unknown territories. These paintings function as cosmetic mirrors that bring out each flaw in the human face and body. They depict the natural state of humanity and we are asked to reflect on who and what we are and where we are going?

Such questions were posed by the Post-Impressionist painter, Paul Gauguin in the late 19th century, who sailed to Tahiti to seek an alternative lifestyle. A visionary, he sought to reach back to the primeval essence of humanity in relation to the environment. In much the same way, Kennedy's intent with these paintings is to invoke a questioning of society and how it relates to the land, reaching back to innocence. But unlike Gauguin, Kennedy has chosen to stay fully enmeshed in the society that she critiques. The bodies that she depicts are whole, fully uniting mind and body, doubling as the body politic. Her vision is romantic and hopeful.

Since the end of modernism, Kennedy's work like the new art elsewhere questions the status quo of society and, while localized and particular, the issues aroused by the images are those that affect the global community. The activist idealism displayed by this set of paintings is in line with Postmodernist currents in art making internationally. In the Postmodern period Kennedy and her work can be deeply rooted in the place that is Saskatchewan, fully acknowledging and celebrating this region as one part of the greater world.

Gail F. Chin
2004

¹ Andrew Straher, *Body Thoughts*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1999, p181.

You've seen that it's not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds.1

Each surrounded by a radiant flickering field of shiny gold leaf rather than contextualized within a specific or recognizable place and each with their gaze cast upward in the direction of the sky or downward in the direction of the earth, these still, solitary almost monumental, almost mythic nudes seem momentarily to resemble spiritualized figures familiar from temple and church walls or ancient ritual texts whose optimistic guidance and talismanic power can forestall physical threats and mitigate metaphysical danger. Yet each gently cradles in their hands a dead animal - a burrowing owl, a passenger pigeon, a yellow warbler - or holds an animal skull - a bleached white skull of a Great Plains wolf, a cougar, a plains bison - the proposing that the orbit of these sorrowful images is more rightly physical and metaphysical frailty.

Inscribed across the undulating skin of these figures are delicate traceries of vein-like lines that represent Saskatchewan roads and trails; are small blemish-symbols that represent the location of old churches, of by-gone territorial battles of the 1800's and even of modern grain terminals in this province; are arcane almost-decorative molecular diagrams that code the DNA helix or write the scientific chemical name of industrial compounds used in present-day agricultural practices here. Re-assigned from body to map thus, these figures no longer suggest the realm of the fabled past but rather the troubled present, describing and charting recent places, events and conditions imposed on the body of the earth.

Sourced from actual topographic, geographic and historical maps as well as from scientific texts, these bodily inscriptions are organizational systems that, like all other maps, employ cartographic processes and scientific paradigms aimed at describing and understanding the world. In their writings and readings though they encode specific world views, specific historical tellings and specific political ideologies, here corresponding to the dominant Eurocentric meta-narratives still operative in this place. Surveying the land, these tattoo-maps name this territory and, in so doing, claim the

land they inscribe: with grid roads, towns and rivers all numbered or named, with events chronologically slotted, these maps boundary and imprison the land – lock it in - in order that it may be not simply understood but controlled.³

Deploying some of the iconographic paradigms of Byzantine icons – which themselves embody the values and moral code of the early Orthodox Christian empire - these mapped figures remind us that the historical voyages of discovery to the New World - idealized pursuit of an earthly paradise or religious freedom or pure knowledge but rather were missions of conquest driven by the fetishistic pursuit of wealth (an additional meaning conveyed by the gold leaf).

While some may consider the maps written on these bodies to be 'mere' diagrammatic representations of actual natural sites, constructed places and recent events within it: territory, they track and code more worryingly the impact of human action within it: these are human texts and as such buried obliquely in them is much about how we think about nature, about this place called Saskatchewan that we inhabit and our relationship to the earth.

Exposing Saskatchewan's past history and explicating its present outcomes then, these maps and arcane scientific visualizations reflect a territory re-constructed and a history overwritten by European colonization, itself driven by capitalist economics. In the name of ownership, colonialism's strategies have included displacement and, through that, disempowerment of indigenous peoples; its consequences include a nature rendered unnatural: here the land is veiled by chemistry, the earth despoiled, the food chain contaminated.⁴

Although fertility and fecundity as a primary condition of nature are foregrounded through the rhythmic processional flicker of male/female here, death and discontinuity haunts these pieta: discord and disease enters the frame, routed here via human/social systems that have pathogenically invaded the indigenous cultural body, the body of nature and the human body - like a virus - laying claim to all these territories: disequilibrium is the narrative of 'empire'.

Yet, understanding these bodies to represent earth's vulnerable pre-colonial body – the body of nature – which was once undisturbed and unsoftened but is at present assaulted, degraded, and exhausted by human intrusions into it – scarred by technology deployed in the name of progress - they are a post-colonial counter-proposition to the Eurocentric body. Contrary rather than confirming then, they encode a bleak dystopia in which luster has been replaced with dread and death.

The lifeless animals and animal skulls held by these figures point to endings rather than beginnings. In anthropological frameworks, they can be understood both animalistically – to represent the life force in living things – and as totems – animal spirit protectors. Adopted by many indigenous peoples both as a clan symbol or as a personal symbol, here their strength-giving power has been rendered barren, emptied out. Thus, as well as identifying the posttechnological death of nature (through pesticides, insecticides, and the destruction of natural habitats), they expose colonialism's terrible consequences. Highly detailed and brightly colored Dutch baroque vanitas paintings similarly depict dead animals to remind us that despite worldly wealth and power, the inevitable consequence of life is death. The present paintings however implicitly understand the over-arching Western European religious and moral codes that operate behind those 17th century paintings to be disruptive to the natural order of things: many of the animals depicted here are either endangered, threatened with extinction, have been extirpated, or have been rendered extinct.

With nature's continuity under threat, our continuance as a species is likewise in doubt from our own actions. As temporal interfaces between past and future, these figures locate our attention firmly in the present: if these bodies encode the diseased corpus, then illness – of both body and mind - is our current condition. Indeed, although acceptance and calm seem to flow across the surface of these lush paintings, they are urgent, passionate polemics addressing our very survival - didactic triggers meant to prompt not only awareness of 'natural' law (as opposed to imposed human law) but to actions sympathetic to it. In this way, these transformative images are a pro-active call to environmental ecology through the social ecology that necessarily precedes it.

According to leading social critic, Murray Bookchin, "What literally defines social ecology as 'social' is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Conversely, present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today...."⁵

By exposing the antagonisms of culture versus nature, this body of work fearfully demands a culture sympathetic to nature – demands a harmonic relationship founded on and resulting in equilibrium, symmetry and mutual respect.

Jack Anderson
Regina: 2004

1 Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Colony*, 1917 (this e-translation by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, Canada, October 2003.)

<http://www.mla.bc.ca/~johnstoi/kafka/inthepenalcolony.htm>

2 or a theoretical discussion of panopticism, and the construction and maintenance of power in social institutions, see Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Toronto: Random House Canada, 1977

3 "...the power to dominate rests on the differential possession of knowledge", from Barton, Ben F., and Marthalee S. Barton. "Modes of Power in Technical and Professional Visuals." *JBTC* 7.1, 1993. 138-62

4 "This Western scientific, industrial revolution has been built on injustice. It has been based on the takeover of the land, its agricultural, metallic and mineral wealth, appropriated through the exploitation of the labor of the indigenous people... We are literally destroying the air, water and soil upon which human life and planetary life depends." Rosemary Radford Ruther, from an undated lecture given at the women's environmental network, London.

<http://www.spunk.org/library/ubs/openeye/sp000943.txt>

5 see Murray Bookchin, *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, edited by M.E. Zimmerman, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993



Marsha Kennedy: Mapping the Land and Body

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Artists' Biographical Information

Marsha Kennedy received her BFA from the University of Regina in 1977 and her MFA from York University in 1981. Her work has been exhibited widely in Canada and is included in numerous private and public collections, including the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Mackenzie Art Gallery, University of Guelph, and the City of Regina Civic Art Collection. She has won awards for her work from the Canada Council, the Saskatchewan Arts Board and the Ontario Arts Council. Marsha Kennedy currently teaches art at the University of Regina.

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