

Carol Wainio: Unsettling Painting's Landscapes

Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa

February 22nd through to April 11th, 2010

Review by Emily Falvey, Canadian Art Online, April 10 - 17, 2010

Painting that challenges or unsettles our expectations is increasingly rare. An unusual pleasure, edged with uncertainty, it may at first leave us feeling a little ambivalent. On the one hand, there is the tingling awareness that we have encountered something different or difficult to break down and categorize; on the other, there is the disconcerting realization that our frame of reference, however jaded, has been thrown into doubt. This tension may at first colour the experience with disdain, or even anger. And yet, if we are able to relax into this uncertainty and its perplexing combination of expansion and loss, it has the potential to broaden our outlook like no other intellectual experience.

Serge Bérard once compared Carol Wainio's paintings to "a thought, which, even if fragmented, seems to come from somewhere else, or rather from an elsewhere other than the field of painting (or the pictorial game)." In her most recent solo exhibition, "The Book," Wainio's work continues to embody this peculiar sense of painting that has stepped outside of itself and its "proper" concerns. Ostensibly a 10-year survey, the exhibition comprised an array of large and small canvases, which together imparted a strong sense of aesthetic and thematic progression. Despite this loosely retrospective framework, the exhibition noticeably emphasized Wainio's most recent work and its growing concern with the effects of global capitalism. In these complex, half-decorative, half-grotesque paintings, Wainio explores the paradoxes of consumerism and poverty through images of books that have, to quote exhibition curator Diana Nemiroff, become "provisional structures in a landscape littered with empty shopping bags and cheap discarded shoes."

Wainio first began exploring the book as a theme in an acclaimed body of work known as *Book of Hours*, which focused on anonymous medieval manuscript illuminations. Since then, her interest in the history of illustration, and particularly 19th-century social caricature and Renaissance children's stories and fairy tales, has developed into a complex consideration of the relationship between symbolic and other forms of capital, as well as the means by which social and aesthetic hierarchies are conveyed and reproduced through images. Recent work in this vein includes 2009's *Puss in Boots Copies* and 2008's *Jack and the Cornstalk*, which use traditional European folktales as a points of departure for a critique of contemporary injustices linked to globalization, such as the devastating social and environmental effects of genetically modified "killer seeds" and corn-derived ethanol fuel.

Historically, myths and legends like *Puss in Boots* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* have functioned as cautionary tales whose morals warned against greed, duplicity and the misrepresentation of social status. Wainio's work taps into this history, but in the service

of social and aesthetic critique rather than morality. Her canvases are indeed like fairy-tale landscapes littered with the detritus of contemporary consumerism, but they are also an amalgam of modernist abstraction and the applied arts. As such her paintings question a range of stubborn class distinctions and cultural assumptions, including aesthetic hierarchies that continue to privilege painting over illustration; the paradox of value conferred by scarcity in a culture of mass production; and the conflation of democratic freedom with free-market enterprise.

In a 2007 review of her work published in *Border Crossings*, Montreal-based artist and critic Randall Anderson gently admonished Wainio for her use of paradox, which he felt made her work too ambivalent. Personally, I consider this refusal to settle down and become painting with a capital P a strength rather than a weakness. Eccentricity, paradox and simultaneity are often indications that aspects of our existence are not finding adequate means of expression. In grappling with these apparent inconsistencies we are also forced to question prevailing cultural and social frameworks. Wainio states this more simply as a “search for meaning about things other than painting, using painting.”



Carol Wainio, *Puss 'n Boots Copies*, 2006

Acrylic on canvas

54" x 72"

137.2 x 182.9 cm