



CURATORIAL ESSAY
THE BODY MAY BE SAID
TO THINK
STUART REID



Doris McCarthy, *Rocks at Georgian Bay*, 1960. Ink on paper, 61 x 76.2 cm.
Collection of the Doris McCarthy Gallery. Gift of the Estate of Doris McCarthy, 2012.

The title of this exhibition draws from a quote in *The Living Mountain* by Scottish modernist writer, Nan Shepherd (1893-1981): “Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think.”¹ Written in the 1940s during the last years of the Second World War, *The Living Mountain* documents Shepherd’s hill walks on the Cairngorm Plateau in northeast Scotland. Shepherd’s prose is a rhapsody on her transcendent experience of landscape through encounters with weather, rocks, rivers, and other creatures. Shepherd conjures imagery that speaks to the energy of the land, the energy that courses through her own body as it grounds itself in the natural world. In nature, as she so poetically states, our body, and all its responsive senses, begins to think.

Such a vibrational harmonic that affords communion between artist and landscape is observed reverently in works by Doris McCarthy (1910-2010) and Kate Wilson. Both artists, creative contemporaries for a few decades, share the passion for trekking and a good road trip. Both draw representational inspiration from nature and fuse imagery with motion, colour, and depth, alluding to a deeper understanding of what is seen with the eyes. There is an intellectual reckoning with choices made in depicting the landscape. McCarthy is credited with the quote:

“You are actually constructing... what your head understood about what your eyes saw.” She asserts that the artist is a thinking body that is at once part of the land and apart from it.

Wilson and McCarthy share an indirect kinship that was aided in 2015 when Wilson was artist-in-residence at the Doris McCarthy Artist-in-Residence Centre, home of the late McCarthy that she gifted to the Ontario Heritage Trust in 1998. Wilson was inspired by the time spent at the home perched near the edge of the high Scarborough Bluffs looking over Lake Ontario. The house, much of it built by McCarthy herself, is infused with her indomitable spirit. A committed artist, a woman charting her own course in the world, challenging norms, pushing boundaries—an awful lot like Wilson herself. Through this intimate encounter of daily living, resonant energies have been exchanged between the two artists that go beyond the constraints of time and space.

McCarthy’s century of life was taken up with art-making and travel for inspiration. She went near and far, extensively crossing Canada and to inspiring landscapes around the world. Many summers were spent on a small island in her beloved Georgian Bay. *Rocks at Georgian Bay*, 1960, shows the energy that the artist mines in that landscape. Wet, fast and furiously applied, the painting is a document of a quick dance between



Doris McCarthy, *Iceberg with Icicles*, 2000. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 213.4 cm. Collection of the Doris McCarthy Gallery. Gift of the artist, 2009.

maker and materials. In 1999, I wrote about this work and its mate, *Rocks at Georgian Bay II*: "... wild works that contain uncharacteristically murky colour passages and a lot of watery dripping of paint on the paper. It is as though the artist attacked the sheet with the brush—although the marks are lyrical they are as untethered as any we have seen in her greater body of work. Trees are scratched in with a dry brush and black paint. The water is a cold blue smear that swirls in a serpentine fashion. Both views are from a high vantage point on the rocks looking down at the shore—we can hear the noise of the rough waves, and sense the sinister jaggedness of the rocks below us... Although the artist's confidence usually reigns over the development of her painting, in these two experiments she has allowed the pictures to paint themselves. This acknowledged release to the nature of the paint and the manifested thrill of really seeing is an undercurrent that runs through all of McCarthy's watercolours."²

For McCarthy, painting has always been a way of processing the physical world around her. In her autobiography, *A Fool in Paradise*, she writes: "The shores of North Lake were wooded with second growth almost to the water's edge. The challenge was to find a subject among so much sameness. It taught me to see subtle variations in the greens, from the bluer green of the pines to the lighter and

yellow-green of the birch and poplar. Skies were always changing. I learned the difference between cumulus and cirrus clouds and how to describe the tones of the night sky, with stars or in moonlight, and one memorable night after rain I saw a moon-bow and painted it."³ Painting is documentation and physical evidence of how the artist thinks with the body.

During numerous trips to the North, McCarthy developed a strong love of that landscape and the people she encountered. Her majestic paintings of icebergs, one of her most iconic subjects, show the incredible ice mountains thrust up from buoyant seas, interacting with the energy of light that pulses and emanates from their luminous surfaces. In this exhibition, *Iceberg with Icicles*, 2000, is a fine example of the artist's depiction of the grandeur of the Arctic. The icebergs are soaring spires in cool blue and white, frozen architectural forms that comprise otherworldly shapes that interact with the clouds above and their icy reflection below. McCarthy is able to conjure the particular subtleties of light play on the ice floes, each an abstract jagged shape in myriad shades of white.

McCarthy's work is ever tethered to the land: even in the mid-1960s as she experimented with abstraction, all the compositions reflected something seen in nature. Those abstractions



Doris McCarthy, *Mal Bay with Fish Racks*, 1954. Watercolour on paper, 50.8 x 59.7 cm. Collection of Rodman Hall Art Centre, St. Catharines. Gift of Lynne Wynick and David Tuck, 2015.

heralded a new mode of working that she called “poetic realism” in which shapes become more simplified and flat—a series of islands of colour that hold space within a moving sea of space. It has been documented that when McCarthy was in need of inspiration she would “look to her feet.”²⁴ The dynamism of the composition of *St. John’s Wort*, 1965, captures the artist’s gesture in making this oil on masonite work, looking at a subject on the ground. The painting depicts the burst of yellow flowers of St. John’s Wort, surrounded with rocks and stones and a dramatic surging line that unites the element into a throbbing island that sits within the picture frame. You can sense the artist’s ecstasy, her wild abandon and the channeling of her singular vision onto the board. In *The Good Wine*, McCarthy wrote about the St. John’s Wort that grew near her cottage on Georgian Bay: “I watch a tubular brown mole scud from under the brush across the open rock into the sanctuary of the mossy hollow where the iris and the St. John’s Wort grow and bloom.”²⁵ Her artmaking, like her acute sensations, is rooted in the moment and that temporality determines the mode of working, the process of representing the world around her.

McCarthy’s depictions of Maritime villages, for example, a subject she is attracted to again and again over her career, build such compositions that mimic the pulse of the ripples of waves and tides. In 1999, I wrote about *Mal Bay with*

Fish Racks, 1954, which figured prominently in the exhibition *The View from Here: 50 Years of Watercolours by Doris McCarthy*: “In *Mal Bay with Fish Racks*, we can see the distinct shape of Percé Rock in the distance. The harbour of the village is filled with boats moored in the water and several beached ashore. The elliptical shapes are attenuated to contrast with the boxy planes of the buildings and the rectangular fish racks that form curved rows on the far right. There is a sense of rocking and a circular radiating movement from the centre of the painting, where the artist has placed the wheel of a cart which seems to be the only circle in the composition. McCarthy lets us see that she has a command and understanding of the reductive principles of simple abstraction and the skeletal structure of a painting, but she remains committed to the representational image.”²⁶ McCarthy infuses the energy of the site into the pictorial construct. The rocking, the repetitive waves, the rhythm of the utilitarian structures all contribute to her treatment of the scene. In all of her work, there is a formal unmooring of shapes from the painting ground, giving her compositions a looseness and motion that lends dynamism and energy, reflecting the constant flux of nature.

Kate Wilson grew up in Toronto, spending weekends in rural Ontario and so has always been inspired by motion of the landscape in passing.



Doris McCarthy, detail, *St. John's Wort*, 1965. Oil on masonite, 61 x 76.2 cm. Collection of the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Gift of the Estate of Doris McCarthy, 2012.

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Kate Wilson, *Afterlife of Buildings*, 2017. Oil on panel, 27.8 x 35.5 cm. Courtesy of General Hardware Contemporary, Toronto.

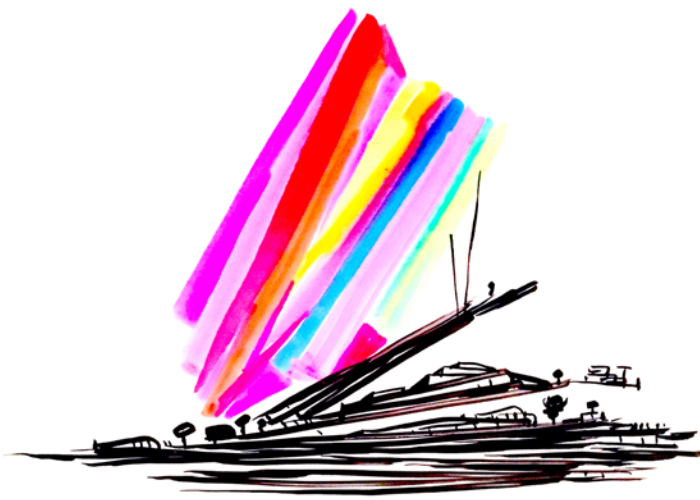
Road trips in her youth framed landscape through the window of a classic car on scenic Grey County backroads. Wilson, like McCarthy, glimpses the infinite in the changing world around her. Wilson wields her brush deftly like a Chinese calligrapher. Works are manifest as smaller ink drawings which are mechanically enlarged and transferred directly to the wall in vinyl or paint. Captured quickly, these drawings reference vastness on a small scale, depicting turbulent change that encompasses the earthly world of trees, grasses, flowers, and man-made architecture, but reaching outward they reel in atmospheric elements including planets and the cosmos.

Wilson's *Afterlife of Buildings*, 2017, is a small drawing that depicts a ubiquitous large box-store building against a dark rumbling sky formed by swirling concentric black clouds. The artist details the frail buildings on a flat horizon line, dwarfed by the churning forms above. One can't help but feel the irony of the bland architecture rendered diminutive by the roiling sky. The application of the paint presents layers behind the rendering of the buildings so they exist as almost transparent ghosts on the horizon line. Wilson, like McCarthy in her spontaneity with materials in the watercolour called *Rocks at Georgian Bay*, lets the process of painting infuse the work with meaning. Energy and the forces of nature at work in the landscape determine

the unmooring of representation, leading to a more fantastical depiction that wanders into the surreal and abstract. The artist thinks with the body, channelling vision through fluid gestural movement recorded in this work.

Wilson's contemporary world may be changing at a more frantic pace than McCarthy's. Wilson's swirling line drawings emerge and recede like a roving funnel cloud—vortices engulfing organic and celestial matter speak of agitation and wind-buffed devastation. The artist's body senses the energy of a nature fighting back and these prophetic drawings hint at a potential cataclysm. Her recent series such as *Chemosphere* or *Fictional Winds* depict a furious collusion of lines and shapes, where synthetic colours, often toxic black, stain the surface. Beauty and death intertwine: nature is a maelstrom in which dark energies are both floral adornments and sinister explosions.

Fictional Winds is a series of black ink drawings that use a tight network of thin lines to conjure the ideas of movement and force. Perhaps it is the word "fictional" in the title that gives the most pause, given the erosion of truth that seems to be a predominant question of our time. How can winds be "fictional"—how can the invisible be drawn? *Fictional Winds* could be harbingers of doom or merely decorative flourishes that manifest from our collective unsettled mind. We sense a great



Kate Wilson, details, *Fictional Winds*, 2018. 35.6 x 27.9 cm / 66 x 50.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

deal of angst and drama in Wilson's epithetic depictions that appear as small lozenges on sheets of white paper. The mark-making harkens back to the tradition of the engraver's use of line, manifesting shape and form in simple black marks. Wilson also adds in some whimsy—floral eruptions and botanical vines bringing levity and variation to the hatching of lines. The drawings are displayed in a grid on the wall, and each seems like a fragment of a larger whole—the enormity of which is impossible to capture in the format chosen. Like shards from a broken mirror, each drawing reflects a partial view of something vast. Our contemporary landscape, ravaged by the extraction industries, gives us burning potential that has sent carbon belching into the atmosphere, ultimately altering our weather and the wind. The human body is limited in its scale and vulnerable in that it cannot in many cases relate itself to the scale of change and destruction. We see the changing world in relation to our corporeal being.

Wilson's *Chemosphere* series of small paintings is infused with smoky black, like a pervasive pollution. Orbs float in space like untethered balloons let drift, their luminous colour somewhat backlit as if on an electronic screen, but that colour is slightly deadened by soot and grime. In terms of these paintings addressing landscape, we do see them as depictions of pattern and form, entities hovering in space, throbbing with

motion. They are works that we look through—they are occlusions, blockages to distance and vista. The dark clouds that fill the frame augur storm and tumult. The works have a flexible scale—at once seemingly microscopic or cellular, yet monumental and apocalyptic. Wilson shows beauty, dark and foreboding. What we glimpse is a world infused with the chemistry of the man-made, the Anthropocene giving rise to a new type of beauty. The body is reflected outwardly, its cellular interior becomes externalized and projected on the sky.

With the juxtaposition of these artists' works, we cast a wide glance over time that spans the previous century, but also forecasts uncertainty in the current. The reassurance, for the viewer, lies in the artists' ability to lead us past what is seen to the realm of what is felt and known in our bodies. Art shows us that it is only the present which we can grasp, as we link into nature and a deep sense of harmony with our environment. As Nan Shepherd writes about her walks: "It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own... I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain."⁷



Kate Wilson, *Chemosphere*, 2018. Oil on panel, 27.9 x 35.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

ENDNOTES

1. Shepherd, Nan. *The Living Mountain* (1977, Aberdeen University Press) p.105.
2. Reid, Stuart. "Island Sketches: Thoughts on the Watercolour Paintings of Doris McCarthy" in *Celebrating Life: The Art of Doris McCarthy* (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1991) p.216.
3. McCarthy, Doris. *A Fool in Paradise: An Artist's Early Life* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1990) p.134.
4. Moore, William. "Heart of Vision" in *Celebrating Life: The Art of Doris McCarthy* (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1991) p.193.
5. McCarthy, Doris. *The Good Wine: An Artist Comes of Age* (Toronto: MacFarlane Walter & Ross, 1991) p.215.
6. Reid, Stuart. "Island Sketches: Thoughts on the Watercolour Paintings of Doris McCarthy" in *Celebrating Life: The Art of Doris McCarthy* (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1991) p.216-219.
7. Shepherd, Nan. *The Living Mountain* (1977, Aberdeen University Press) p.108.

This essay accompanies *the body may be said to think*, works by Doris McCarthy and Kate Wilson, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from November 16, 2018 - January 26, 2019.

COVER IMAGE: Kate Wilson, *Chemosphere*, 2018. Oil on panel, 27.9 x 35.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Stuart Reid is an award-winning writer and curator of contemporary art. He has held curatorial posts in major public art galleries in Ontario such as Art Gallery of Mississauga, Tom Thomson Art Gallery and Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University; and also served as Executive Director of the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina SK. He is a former president of the Ontario Association of Art Galleries. A graduate of York University in Toronto, he also completed the J. Paul Getty Trust Museum Leadership Institute training at the University of California at Berkeley in 2002. Reid is also a member of IKT International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art, Osnabrueck, Germany.

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