

## OPEN GROUND

“My work deals with the type of landscape that is commonly disregarded. I paint aerial views of land interrupted by depots, industrial units, motorways and business parks: unpeopled, peripheral land. These areas are un-aestheticised, associated as bleak or soulless, and to paint them with care and attention sets up a contradiction that fascinates me. That we want nature to be sublime renders this new landscape virtually invisible. As this landscape is not ‘seen’, to paint it, and from high up and far away, is a way to be able to see it”.

Carol Rhodes [c. 2001]

Carol Rhodes invented her landscapes. Starting with what she described as “the shape of an idea” she would look through a huge number of different photographs reproduced in the books that she kept in her studio, fleshing the idea out, piece by piece, from different images, then spending a long time drawing it out<sup>1</sup>. The drawings provided the skeleton that gave her the freedom to use the paint. They were entirely functional, ‘cartoons’ for the paintings. Rhodes traced the lines from the finished drawings onto the primed boards that she used for painting on. The painting would sometimes diverge from the drawing during the process of making and she might need to go back to the drawing and re-trace the lines of the original composition. She would highlight the lines that needed to be re-traced using different coloured pencils. An example of this can be seen in the drawing ‘Open Ground and Mudflats’, included in this exhibition.

Rhodes preferred to use a single layer of paint brushed onto a hard, very smooth, white ground made using a thixotropic primer applied to a mdf or plywood support. Her painting process was very labour intensive. She frequently wiped areas back to the white ground before reworking them, an activity that only ceased when she felt the painting had lost its hard-worked look and come to possess what she called a “psychological charge”.

The paintings in this exhibition illustrate two subjects that recur frequently in Rhodes’s work - sites of mining and extraction (‘Deposits’ and ‘Industrial Landscape II’) and means of communication and transit, such as rivers, roads and bridges (‘River, Roads’, and ‘Development Centre, Roads’).

In the statement quoted at the beginning of this text Rhodes describes her fascination with the disregarded and the not conventionally beautiful, but her paintings are also imbued with the personal and the metaphorical. She grew up in an industrial town near Kolkata in India and the fluvial shapes in ‘River, Roads’, ‘Flood Area’ and ‘Open Ground and Mudflats’ can be traced back to the grey mud of the tidal Hooghly River, a tributary of the Ganges, which flowed past her childhood home.

The aerial perspective so characteristic of her paintings was about more than just being able to see better. Notes for the lectures she gave to the students she taught at the Glasgow School Art record her further thoughts about this:

“The thing about being up high is that you can see a lot. And the higher up you go, the more you can see. The more terrain that is opened up for us to see, the easier it is to understand what happens below and so it gives us a feeling of security and control. But if you go too high, there is a line that, when crossed, changes that into an agoraphobic panic. I would like my pictures to be on that line. Actually you can talk about that line in a general sense about a successful piece of work, the line between security and unease.”

There is also a sense that the land in Rhodes’s paintings can be read as a wounded body. “Organs, muscles, veins, skin and bones are continually suggested. The beautiful, strange, even

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<sup>1</sup> The range of books in Rhodes’s library included textbooks on art history, geology, geography; tourist board publications and the genre of coffee-table book with titles such as ‘Britain From The Air’. She would also make use of photographs that she took herself - often from a helicopter or light aircraft - and, later, images sourced on the internet.

fascinatingly repugnant forms, and colours and textures in the work evoke those of our own bodies, inside and out.”<sup>2</sup>

Today we are being made increasingly aware of the climate crisis facing the world and this has added a greater poignancy to the landscapes that Rhodes depicted.

When thinking about the various possible meanings of Rhodes’s paintings it is very important, however, not to overlook their physical nature. The surface quality of the paint crucial for her, “almost pathologically important” she said. As were composition and colour. Sometimes a painting would start from the idea of a colour. Annotated strips of paper used as bookmarks - which survive in her archive - record the page numbers in books in which a particular colour, or the resonance or sum of colours and tones, on the printed page had caught her attention. Many of these notes will have predated her starting work on a particular painting. She liked the way that oil paints are made up of stuff in the world - minerals, organic matter, etc. “Some tubes are dense and heavy, and other tubes weigh hardly anything. Some are gritty and weak, and other ones are slimy and powerful. I’m a bit of a nerd about all that”.

Carol Rhodes was born in Edinburgh in 1959. She spent her early childhood in Bengal, India, returning to the UK when she was 14 and later studying at Glasgow School of Art. After graduating in 1982 she stopped painting for nearly ten years focussing instead on social and political activism, including the anti-nuclear and women’s movements, and was a founder member of the Glasgow Free University. She started painting again in 1992 and her work began to be exhibited regularly from 1994. In 2013 she was diagnosed with motor neurone disease and died in 2018. A mid-career survey of Rhodes’s work was presented at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh in 2007. More recent institutional surveys have been presented at MAC Belfast (2017), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow (2021), the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (2023) and the Haus am Waldsee, Berlin (2024).

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<sup>2</sup> Merlin James: *Earth/Body/Painting*, in “Carol Rhodes”, published by the Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, 2007.