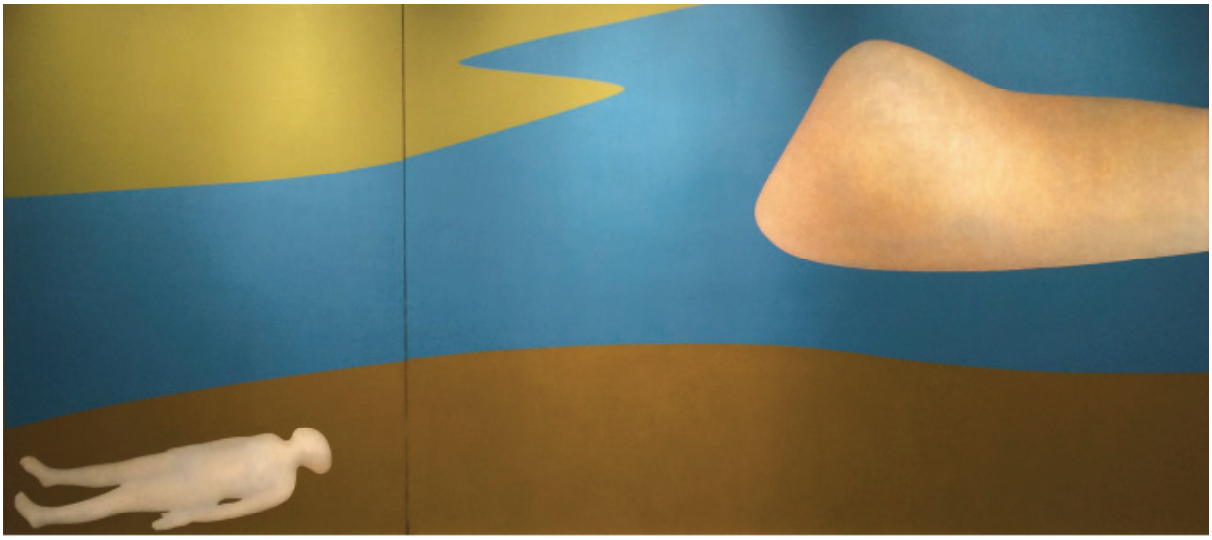

Caroline Dukes, Landscape#6, 1976, acrylic on canvas, Collection of the School of Art

Caroline Dukes | *Being There*

In 1972, Caroline Dukes graduated from the University of Manitoba School of Art at the age of 43. That same year, she cast the untitled female torso now in the collection of the School of Art and on view in *Caroline Dukes Being There*. The sculpture's porous and pocked surface, a consequence of casting in stone, lends an unfinished quality. It is dutiful to imperfection and the texture of age and experience, rather than renaissance polish or the idealism of classical antiquity. The woman is substantial and solid. She gazes downwards, but hers is an unbreakable presence. Large hands lay with ease at her sides and suggest the potential for action, for creation. It is a serene and quiet study.

While Dukes eventually abandoned sculpture to work in two-dimensions, the artist's earliest education was sculpture-based. She apprenticed with sculptor Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl in 1948, while taking night classes at the Free University. In 1952 she enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest. Even then, she was "a highly accomplished art student."[1] With the birth of her first son, Dukes decided to raise her family before pursuing a professional practice and it was nearly fifteen years later, settled in Winnipeg, that she took-up artmaking full time. Dukes quickly found an enduring place in Winnipeg's art scene and the city's diverse milieu of artistic practices proved a nurturing locale for her creativity. The tumultuous events of Dukes' childhood, including the death of her father and her survival of the Holocaust have been cited as formative influences in her life and art, as have her years spent in Budapest during the post-war communist regime.[2] Sustained dedication to her Orthodox faith was also present in her practice, especially in later years when artworks and personal storytelling came into closer contact.[3] Throughout, the influence of sculpture permeated her practice and found expression in new mediums.

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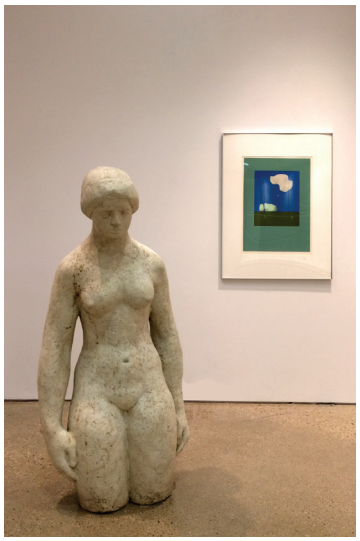
[1] Alfred Dukes, quoted in *Caroline Dukes: Concealed Memories* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2008), 45.
[2] See Mary Reid, "Concealed Memories," *Concealed Memories* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2008), 38; and Shirely Madill, "Territories of Desire: The Art of Caroline Dukes," *At the Focus of Forces* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1991), 8.
[3] Bev Pike, quoted in *Concealed Memories*, 43.



Caroline Dukes, Untitled, 1972, cast stone; **Prairie, 1978,** Silkscreen, Collection of the School of Art

Dukes' paintings of the 1970s, for instance, remain attuned to space and the weightiness of sculptural presence. Drawing on modern and classical elements from her European education, as well as prairie surrealism and existentialism, Dukes explored the nature of cultural memory and the fragility and resiliency of human life in works such as *Landscape #6* (1976). The flat expanses of colour in this piece are punctuated by two precisely modeled forms. The title disassociates the work from any specific place and encourages an understanding of painting as an act of construction. The construction of realities by plastic means, a central concern in Dukes' practice, was also important to the modernists of previous decades. Visual tension created by contrasting areas of flatness and recession, texture and smooth are further parallels. Indeed, *Landscape #6* might read as a blending of minimalist abstraction and Henry Moore's biomorphic sculpture, in Dukes' ground and figures respectively. However, the human and non-human forms in Dukes' surreal painting invite self-involvement as surrogates for the viewer (and the artist as viewer), transforming a flat, alien landscape into a site. Habitation initiates conversation. The piece subverts the non-figurative nature of late modernism and introduces existential narratives of isolation, subjectivity, and agency.

To compare this work with later paintings, as well as the charcoal drawings on display, is to identify important changes in Dukes' stylistic approach. Gone are the careful, uniform backgrounds. In their place, structures are pushed towards the surface, rendered with a more vigorous brush, or crayon as the case may be. Dukes produced these as parts in a series of architectural drawings in the 1980s. They feature unidentified structures from the Holy City of Jerusalem, brought into being by the artist's "curving strokes of charcoal" and eroded by those same gestures.[4] While the chiseled forms and figures have also gone, a sophisticated contemplation of presence and absence, the personal and the cultural remains. In fact, reflecting on the visual transformations of her work over time, Dukes has asserted that "what might seem to be abrupt changes, in retrospect, was actually a slow evolution."[5] This self-

[4] Elizabeth Legge, "Caroline Dukes," *Caroline Dukes: Concealed Memories* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2008), 16.
[5] Caroline Dukes, quoted in *Concealed Memories*, 7.

Caroline Dukes, Building #16, 1990, charcoal on paper, Collection of the School of Art

conscious growth was propelled by her desire to speak truths, to achieve a synthesis of personal expression and universal experience. A revolution in style was settled on to better achieve these aims.

Taking a closer look, we can see why Elizabeth Legge described Dukes' drawings in terms of both conception and erasure. Out-of-focus renderings transform recognizable structures into unfamiliar spaces. Shadowed corners are fraught with uncertainty. In his essay for *The Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, contributor Wouter Weijers intones: "Memories do not simply emerge from a readily available past but are constructed and reconstructed in the present."[6] Jerusalem, a place embedded with private and collective memory, is a complex cultural product and a lived-in space; Dukes engages in its continued construction in her architectural drawings that shape and blur. If hers is "an art of memory," the structures pictured in her works propose the "scaffolding," a sort of "mental architecture."[7] She illustrates how personal memories and historical narratives are moulded by spaces and structures that in turn give form to the past just as they share a part in determining the future. She fills human absence with the presence of history: busy hands laying brick and building hope; the presence of myth and memory and mourning. In so doing, Dukes tests "the possibilities of history and the present, emphasizing fragility, change, the shifting nature of history."[8] In diverse mediums, Dukes interrogates these big questions. Large-scale and broad strokes seem appropriate modes of execution for such an artist.

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[6] Wouter Weijers, "Jerusalem as *Trauerarbeit:* On Two Paintings by Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter," *The Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 60.

[7] Legge, "Caroline Dukes," 16.

[8] Shirley Madill, "Territories of Desire," 10.

Caroline Dukes, Building #2, 1988, charcoal on paper, Collection of the School of Art

Caroline Dukes was born in a small town on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary in 1929. At the age of four, she lost her father to illness and, the following year, moved with her mother into the city. Oppressive laws, instituted at the outbreak of World War II, robbed the nation's Jewish citizens of their civil liberties; Dukes was forced to abandon her studies at the Royal Opera House in 1939 as a direct result of these discriminatory practices. From March 1944 to April 1945 thousands of Hungarian Jews were ghettoized or deported to concentration camps when the Nazis occupied the country. Dukes and her mother were captured while in hiding, sent to a ghetto, and later escaped. The Soviets liberated Hungary from German occupation in 1945, but initiated a decades-long socialist regime that was both rigid and repressive.

Dukes was married in Budapest and had two sons with her husband, Alfred Dukes. During a brief window of opportunity afforded by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the family emigrated from Budapest to Austria, then Canada, arriving in Toronto in 1958. Dukes' third son was born prior to the family's eventual settlement in Winnipeg. Arriving in 1967, Dukes was able to take-up the practice she had long put on hold at the School of Art in 1968, graduating with her BFA in 1972. Dukes was a fixture of the Winnipeg arts community for over 35 years. Her distinct and revered contributions to Winnipeg art history have been recorded in the many exhibitions of her work at home and abroad. Her career was supported through numerous provincial and federal grants and celebrated by collectors, critics, and admirers alike.

Essay by Hannah Keating | Exhibition organized by Jamie Wright

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See also

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