

BEV PIKE
Hymenal Views

March 8 to April 19, 2013

School of Art Gallery



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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Hymenal View of Chill (detail), 2010, gouache on paper, 244.0 x
620.0, collection of the artist

Hymenal Views

by Mary Reid

Six massive paintings fill the gallery, creating an alternate environment in which gargantuan bundles of clothing morph and shape into expansive land forms and vistas. Bev Pike re-presents various types of landscapes as imagined mounds of knitted sweaters and seas of fabrics.

Holding a long-time personal interest in textiles, Pike engages with these representations as both the object and subject in her work. Fabric is a strong signifier, connoting a plethora of associations: to women's work, to fashion, to domesticity and to second skins. Particularly, handmade sweaters are embedded with the history and the energy of the maker and the wearer alike. Using the sensory stimulation that textiles elicit, Pike links the knotted wool to exoskeletons, internal organs and emotions. She thus opens up many parallels and platforms to cultivate and mine. Pike's work simultaneously empowers and exploits fibres of all sorts.

In these paintings, Bev Pike's position as a feminist activist and spinster is unravelled and then spun again through one emotional state at a time. The historical

construction, misunderstanding and subsequent mistreatment of the "feminine problem" of hysteria is the central character of the narratives presented here. During the Victorian era, hysteria was a popular catch-all diagnosis applied specifically to women who exhibited a wide array of symptoms ranging from faintness to irritability. These "lady-like" maladies were mistakenly thought to be linked to the uterus's position in the body and were seen as indicators of sexual malfunction. Qualities of emotional excess and panic-inducing situations, as well as direct references to the female reproductive membranes on the uterus and hymen, are deeply embedded in each of these pieces. For the artist, these works present "a story coming from a marginalized position," their impressive scale significant and necessary to communicate a female-centred point of view that society, even today, overlooks.

With the exception of the newest work in this exhibition, each piece bears the prefix title *Hymenal View*. The hymen is the membrane that covers the vaginal orifice and is commonly associated with proof of virginity. The notion of "view" can suggest literal penetration or





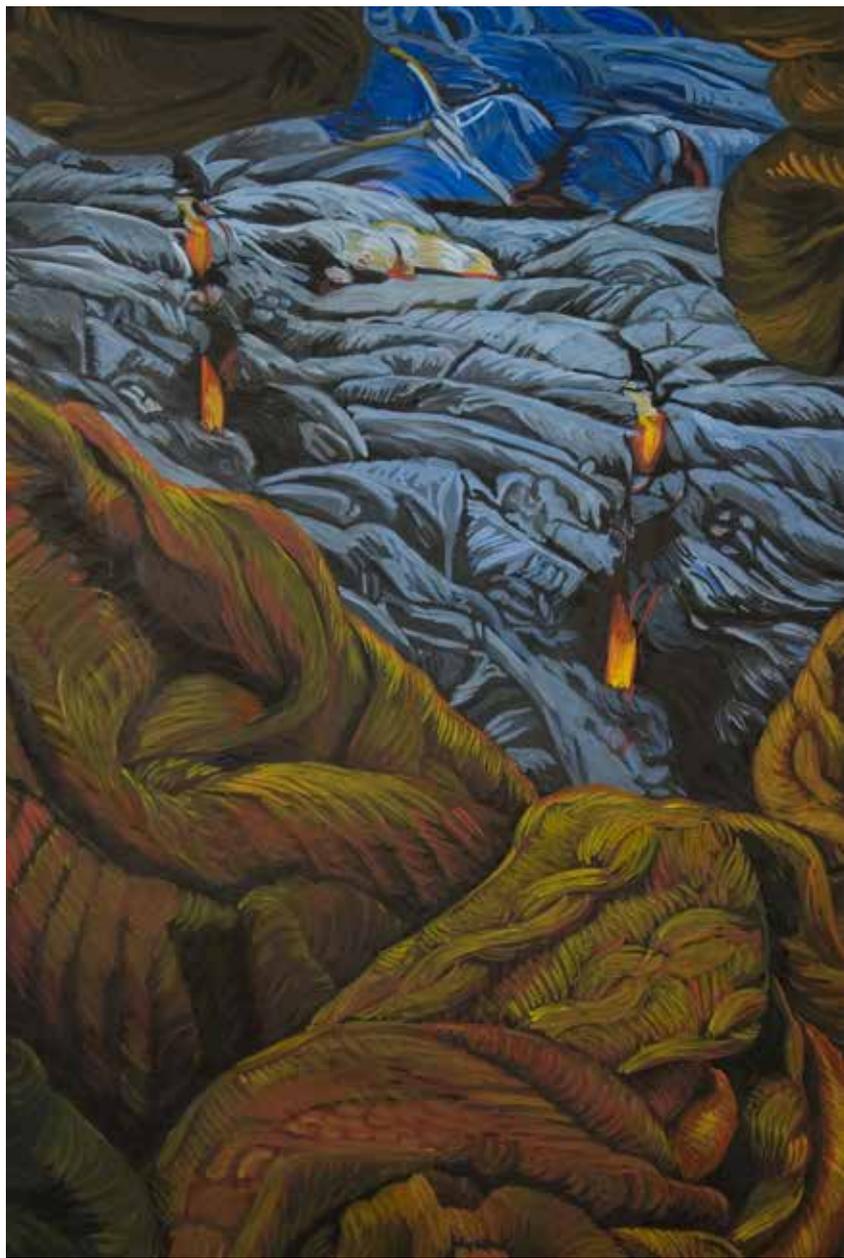
metaphorically describe a perspective which is unique to women. Pike's paintings of vast landscapes follow the long tradition of equating the female body to ideas of mother earth; however, the practice of objectification is negated in these works. Here the view from within pushes out into a larger arena, staking ground, claiming space and commanding, as well as demanding, attention.

The earliest work in the exhibition is *Hymenal View of Lunacy* (2003). Chaotic and densely packed, this painting is psychologically charged with meaning and metaphor. Loosely structured on a grid, the viewer's eyes (and seemingly body) begin to roll about among the various bundles of fabric, twisted, knotted and interlaced. This imposing mass is punctuated by dark tunnels that recess into deep space, alluding to orifices that can be threatening, holding the potential to bring forth some unknown entity. Visceral associations abound to contorting tendrils of seaweed, wriggling nest serpents, or roping intestinal matrices. The feeling is claustrophobic, conjuring anxiety and perhaps an overwhelming loss of control.

Evidenced in Pike's carefully rendered visual manifestation of "lunacy," this state of being mentally ill can be interrupted by moments of clarity. The artist's goal with this painting was to embody the horrible feeling of utter alienation as a result of not being

understood, believed or heard – a universal condition, more common to women, that is loaded with societal stigma and shame.

With *Hymenal View of Alchemy* (2008), the feeling of estrangement shifts to that of potential, the ability to turn something banal into something valued. Associations with menstrual cycles and reproductive possibilities sit on the surface, but serious consideration of this work moves to states of change that are fundamentally located in one's psyche. The viewer's position is now deeply embedded in one of the murky recesses depicted in *Lunacy*. Tunnelled in, this retreat to recover and recuperate becomes coupled with the gathering of strength. From the safety of the cave's entrance, the wide blue vista flickering with small fires emanating from other similar grottos is gazed upon. The glow from the fire situated outside the frame of this work, yet located in front of the viewer's space, casts light onto the knitted garments that have been transformed into stalactites and stalagmites of lava. The draw to the world outside is magnetic but approached with some trepidation, as wounds are still healing (and battle scars never go away). Are the other caverns friend or foe? Far in the distance is the horizon line which provides the suggestion of a destination, of a place beyond, of an opportunity to discover and experience something new or different. This threshold presents the opportunity for change as well as uncertainty.







The presence of the horizon is important because it leads the viewer along, providing an element to hang onto while traversing the psychological terrain in *Hymenal View of Chill* (2010). Courage and confidence have taken over and lead out of the shadows into an expansive, mirroring, mountainous range of fibres. The loose symmetry down the centre reflects Pike's research in the Baroque, with the use of reflection creating drama and emotive power as the eye is drawn up the centre and around in a circular fashion. With this inherent insipient spin, the threatening oppressiveness of *Lunacy* and latent hesitation of *Alchemy* have radically evolved into hopeful possibilities. Inspired by underwater photographs of arctic ice, Pike set out to capture a sense of peacefulness. Seductively beautiful, there is a double edge to this emotional state, as it is the place where the story ends and a new one begins.

In these works the political and personal are woven together to create an environment that affects and overwhelms the viewer, producing states of being that elicit new feelings and insights. Highly illustrative and detailed, these paintings are incredibly labour intensive. Each work takes a full year to complete, a testament to Pike's commitment to her practice and her purpose to present her own point of view. The passage of time is an important aspect that is built into the actual construction as well as the viewing of these pieces. The viewer has to physically move in and around,

back and forth, up and down the gallery to take in the entirety of the installation. This path of looking is similar to the artist's own movements during the process of creating. As viewers, we fill her shoes, we walk in her footsteps and we can gain an understanding of what she is communicating. As a woman who has consciously empowered her position as a spinster, replete with flowery patterned dresses and layers of knitted shawls, Pike feels that with these works she has truly found her voice as an artist using her skills, and her position as a feminist on her own terms.

All quotes and references were taken from an interview with the artist on January 27, 2013. The author wishes to thank Denis Longchamps and Bev Pike for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

Artist's Biography

Bev Pike is a Winnipeg polymath. She has built an impressive body of work and is known for her large-scale oracular land-form paintings. Since graduating from the Alberta College of Art in 1974, Pike's work has exhibited across Canada in solo and group exhibitions. In addition, she has been the recipient of several senior arts grants from the Winnipeg Arts Council, Manitoba Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. Her work has been collected by the Canada Council Art Bank, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (North York), the Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank (Brandon), Winnipeg Art Gallery, McKenzie Art Gallery (Regina), the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Tate Modern (London) and numerous artist-book collections in North America and England. Pike is an experienced artist and influential cultural advocate. Pike's current research areas include performative landscape, underground shell grottoes and other Baroque spectacles.

List of Works

All works by Bev Pike, Canadian, b. 1953
Dimensions are listed in cm as height x width
Photo credits: Robert Barrow and Sheila Spence
r = reproduced page

Hymenal View of Lunacy, 2003, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery; gift of the artist (2008-2), r 2-3

Hymenal View of the Deluge, 2005, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the artist

Hymenal View of the Reflective, 2007, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the artist

Hymenal View of Alchemy, 2008, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the artist, r 5 (detail), 6-7

Hymenal View of Chill, 2010, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the artist, r cover

Bizzarria View – Margate, 2011, gouache on paper, 244.0 x 620.0, collection of the artist

