Editorial. Carol Rhodes: Seen and Unseen

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Abstract

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* compiles contributions from *Carol Rhodes: Seen and Unseen*, a day-long symposium that took place at The Glasgow School of Art in April 2024. The purpose of this event was to provoke a range of new writing around Rhodes's paintings, exploring how existing scholarship on her practice might be both consolidated and expanded upon. The conference also commissioned new responses emerging from study with the Carol Rhodes archive, including creative writing and visual art. The following editorial examines the key debates that emerged around this body of work and reflects on the important issues surfacing from this new scholarship.

Carol Rhodes (1959–2018) was arguably one of the most important British painters of her generation. In many ways an artist's artist, her reputation was established during her lifetime, yet there is no doubt that her work has more to offer future scholarship in the field of painting and beyond. It is interesting that much of the writing gathered for this Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* is by artists and writers who explore her legacy through the detailed analysis of single paintings. Indeed, her deceptively simple works respond to scrutiny, offering up insights into a range of subjects including an understanding of spatiality, the critique of post-industrial capitalism and the experience of a post-human landscape. Commencing in the early 1990s, Rhodes built a body of paintings that is perhaps uniquely singular in its aerial depiction of landscape. Borne out of a fastidious process of assembly, a bringing together of imagined elements, photographs taken by both the artist and others and forms inspired by a lineage of landscape painting – of which she herself was a latter exponent – these works are complex meditations on how a pictorial image might be formed. The scenes Rhodes created are marked by a sense of liminality: a sense of space on the verge of becoming, or captured while changing from one state to another. This is a quality that she both depicted and made manifest through a highly personal painterly process. Her paintings reflect on their own materiality, speculating on what paint is and can become, as well as their mode of address to the viewer.

This Special Issue compiles contributions from *Carol Rhodes: Seen and Unseen*, a daylong symposium that took place at The Glasgow School of Art in April 2024. The purpose of the event was to provoke a range of responses to Rhodes's paintings and to explore how existing scholarship on her practice might be both consolidated and expanded. Conversations revolved around speculations on what the fictional sites the artist depicted might represent, and the kinds of history it is productive to attach her oeuvre to. Some presenters examined the work through the lens of Rhodes's own reflections, whilst others departed from this frame altogether. What was perhaps most marked was the range of responses her singular and coherent body of painting were able to produce – a diversity that is represented in the contributions assembled here.

Rhodes's legacy remains closely linked to the place in which she lived and worked. Her paintings have consistently featured in surveys of Scottish art from the outset of her career (White 1994; Brown and Tufnell 2001; Jeffrey 2014), and in 2021, a survey devoted to her work at Kelvingrove Museum occupied a prominent position in Glasgow International, the city's biennial of contemporary art. This civic association is further reinforced by the role Rhodes played in shaping the city's cultural institutions. Her influence as an educator is not least attested to by the number of symposium speakers who she taught during her tenure as a lecturer in the Painting and Printmaking Department of The Glasgow School of Art. Committed as she was to the development of her own practice, the exhibitions she organized at 42 Carlton Place, an artist-run space she operated with her partner the painter Merlin James, drew local attention to a number of painters' practices, including Christina Ramberg, Clive Hodgson and Adrian Morris. The thoughtful approach so evident in her painting can be seen in the forms of attention she offered to these artists, born out of an intuitive sympathy for their work and offering the viewer an intimate engagement with their processes.

Equally important however is a growing international interest in her practice. Solo surveys mounted in the Bonnenfanten Museum, Maastricht (2023) and at Haus am Waldsee, Berlin (2024) have served to place the work in a wider context, in turn prompting parallels that might be drawn more broadly to debates concerning painting's status in the 1990s. A 2018 monograph consolidated existing scholarship on the practice (Mummery 2018). Featuring contributions from writers in long-standing conversation with Rhodes, including Andrew Mummery, Moira Jeffrey and Lynda Morris, this provided a solid framework through which the paintings might be interpreted, while allowing for more speculative enquiries to now take place.

At a time of growing political uncertainty, it is noteworthy that an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the life Rhodes led in the interim between graduating from art school in 1982 and taking up painting as a full-time pursuit in 1990. During this period, she was engaged in a variety of other activities. In addition to contributing to the vitality of the artistic scene forming in Glasgow at that time through her position on the second committee of Transmission Gallery between

1986 and 1988, Rhodes was heavily engaged in a variety of other forms of social organizing. Amongst other things, these include her role as a founding member of Free University Glasgow (1987–91) – an alternative educational model established 'in recognition of the potential in cultural activity to push things along and make connections between people', marked by 'a complete intolerance of rigid specialisms' (Dickson 2001: n.pag.) – and participation in campaigns including Reclaim the Night and Reclaim the City. Engagement with political causes was a part of daily life prior to a decision to commit her energies fully to painting.

Today, filmed footage of Rhodes being forcibly removed by police from Greenham Common proves important for a younger generation of artists, acknowledging that alongside the paintings and drawings she has left behind, there is also a legacy of her direct action. It is quite possible that these two categories of image act in tandem, appearing resonant for those seeking to better understand how their political world-view intersects with the vocabularies they are cultivating as creative practitioners. Worth observing is the degree to which Rhodes serves as a role model to a group of writers (O'Grady 2024; Pearce 2024), some of whom have taken inspiration from this eight-year interregnum in her artistic practice.

The conundrum of how to reconcile an artist's biography with their output is a point upon which their reflections have often hinged, and recent feminist thought allows us to view Rhodes's activism as part of an 'expanded legacy' (Hebson 2016) or 'disoeuvre' (Allen 2018). Solutions offered to this question seek to suture together different modes of authorial subjectivity, creating narratives that are multi-perspectival. These experimental responses contain compelling parallels with Rhodes's own avid interest in science fiction: not only a speculative space in which landscape can be re-imagined but also, crucially, a genre that relies on inverting or playing with the rules of the reality we currently inhabit. Indeed, her methods of composition and careful colour calibration appear to develop a very contemporary form fictioning or 'world building', recognizable depictions made strange.

For her part, Rhodes was sceptical about the mixing of art and activism and careful to delineate between the self-evident properties of her paintings and her thoughts on other matters. Accordingly, if a politics is present in her carefully constructed scenes, it lies submerged somewhere beneath their surface. Despite the artist's counsel however, the idea that her representations of transport networks, mining belts and distribution centres might act as implicit critique of the operations of late-stage capitalism remains seductive. Past years have seen attempts to assess these paintings as iconographic depictions of Post Fordist economies (Ward 2021), opaque sites of material production expelled to the outskirts of the metropole or offshored entirely. Interpreted in this manner, they point to an 'infrastructural' reality all too easily overlooked, but to which increased critical attention is being paid. In addition to constituting a de-localized 'non-place' (Augé 1995) or environmental 'edgeland' (Lubbock 2007), such spaces could also be considered as a representations of 'extrastatecraft', the 'secret weapon of the most powerful people in the world precisely because it orchestrates activities that can remain unstated but are nevertheless consequential' (Easterling 2014: 15).

This attempt to tether these paintings to an overt set of political concerns in turn prompts a conversation concerning the traditions, artistic and intellectual, to which they might be appended. Formed in the immediate wake of Neo-Expressionist painting, emblematized in Scotland by the success of the 'New Glasgow Boys' – such as Stephen Campbell, Ken Currie and Adrian Wiszniewski – and running parallel to the development of 'neo-conceptual' art by those who sought to unseat them, Rhodes's practice is not so easily categorized. Instead, in her mind at least, her output operated in a more selective dialogue with a range of painterly allies, very much of her own choosing. In tutorials with Carol, conversations ranged from, amongst other things, the enclosed life system portrayed by Fairfield Porter, to the strange intentionality bound up in Alfred Jensen's use of impasto. It seemed as if value could be drawn from anywhere, so long as sufficient attention was paid to the way subject matter and its technical representation interacted. Seen in this way, painting is less a discourse to be moved forward than something to be tactically inhabited and shaped to one's own

ends. There is an intrinsic generosity in this position, in that it affords everyone a space to practise so long as they do so in a spirit of determined seriousness that Rhodes herself exemplified.

It is in this same spirit that contributions for this Special Issue have been gathered. Moyra Derby's text 'Distance tactics' uses three philosophical explorations of space, published during the period Rhodes left art school but before her return to painting, as a lens through which to view spatiality's critical potential for painting. For example, Derby evokes the notion of Modernist 'spaces of femininity' derived from Griselda Pollock's attentive reading of the paintings of Morisot and Cassatt, to chart the 'careful negotiations' Rhodes performs as she both implies and denies the individual or authorial gesture, a (feminist) somatic intimacy, kept in check. Here, the idea of a 'scopic regime' advanced by Martin Jay is crucial in articulating the precise and complex ways in which Rhodes's work functions spatially, often destabilising a singular or pure reading of the work.

Derby's exploration of a kind of intimate distance and the potential for introducing a feminist lens to Rhodes's work is also apparent in the visual essay by Painting Nerds (Jamie Limond and Samuel O'Donnell), a reimagining of a video essay of the same name (Painting Nerds 2024). Here, a proposed lineage of the landscape genre to which Rhodes belongs is taken up through an examination of her work *Construction Site* (2003), drawing parallels with John Constable's painting *Boat Near Flatford Mill* (c.1815) and Winifred Knights's *The Deluge* (1920). Through visual and textual means a motif of 'the flood' is developed, an epochal event in which all is swept away, a scenario in which Rhodes's gendered 'pictorial empathy with the non-human world' is able to surface.

In counterpoint, Craig Staff considers how Rhodes's practice might be grounded in an extra sensory empirical tradition, via Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's writing on the subject. In this reading, distance from a subject can afford a form of closeness as Rhodes's becomes an 'active' participator in the scenes she depicts. Staff fruitfully explores Rhodes's own account of her painting process which describes a kind of sensory inhabitation of her photographic source material and aligns it with Goethe's own 'empathetic looking – grounded in direct experience'.

Prior to the 2024 GSA symposium, the School of Fine Art awarded a series of bursaries to researchers to facilitate a period of research into an archive of Rhodes's papers and working materials. These resources include an extensive collection of notes and drawings made while preparing paintings, a wide range of differing forms of source material she kept in her studio, unfinished paintings and documents. One award has generated the first scholarship devoted to the detailed preparatory colour notes Rhodes maintained while working on a painting. Painter Sin Park has used these to trace the stages of several paintings' development that detail colour choices. Park has then employed these colour notes to derive an understanding of Rhodes's working process, which in turn allowed her generate responsive canvases of her own. Through this study, Rhodes is revealed as not only a painter developing a craft but also an inventive thinker, whose rigorous approach allows for spontaneity. Park's visual essay makes clear that there is much yet to be yielded from the scrutiny of Rhodes's preparatory material, for artists as well as historians.

Another bursary holder, Paul Pieroni, analyses how the socio-economic activity leading up to the 1988 Garden Festival – an early example of Glasgow being shaped by the forces of neo-liberal cultural enterprise – is closely considered in relation to both Rhodes's role in protesting the festival and her return to painting to forge a way beyond the medium's 'empty aesthetic'. Pieroni's close observation of the materiality and composition of three paintings held in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland reveals how the work's facture articulates its criticality. For example, by working through his initial discomfort with Rhodes's use of colour or the disorientation emerging from the 'tilted overview' she favoured, he comes to see the potential of the formal properties of painting to embody a political subject whilst simultaneously 'teetering' on the edge of 'pure abstraction'.

In contrast, Rosie Roberts used time spent with the archive, housed in the studio Rhodes maintained at the time of her passing, to generate a body of art writing. In a sequence of vignettes, each based on particular paintings, Roberts populates these landscapes with figures (who she refers to as 'surrogate viewers') drawn from her own lived experience, weaving amongst these points of

reference gleaned from materials found in in Rhodes's studio: the artist's CD collection, books on astronomy and unpublished notes. The hybridity of the situations Roberts creates are proposed as analogous to the methods Rhodes used when composing her own imagery, a process of working and reworking material until they assume a contiguous dialogue.

Aligned with this approach – an autotheoretical mode that can be understood as implicitly feminist (Fournier 2022) – Shona MacNaughton utilizes fragmentation as a formal strategy through which a disjuncture between Rhodes's time in political organizing and her artistic life might be addressed. In this text, which has been adapted from a script performed at the symposium, the challenges of reconciling various forms of information are taken up as an active subject. While sampling an instructional second wave feminism, taken from activist causes to which Rhodes associated herself, MacNaughton narrates an account of her research as it unfolds, questioning the ends to which it might be applied. Central to this is a sense of misalignment she feels with the interest taken in Rhodes's career by those who identify as painters, and whose stakes in it seem so at odds with her own. MacNaughton's method is deliberately employed to confront this tension, so as to, borrowing from McKenzie Wark's definition of critical autotheory, 'deal with the negotiations involved in producing solidarity out of difference' (2023).

MacNaughton's reflection on her own agency elucidates many of the questions that can come to preoccupy us when reflecting on Rhodes and her legacy. Those include the degree of emphasis that should be placed on contextual factors when considering a practice so assured and self-contained, or the uses of exploring a painting's process, as well as the treacherous territory of the relations between an artist's beliefs and practice and the degree to which a body of paintings might act to embody critical frameworks. This is something we are glad to leave open here, as the richness of Rhodes's practice is nowhere better attested to than by the range of responses it continues to provoke, and the interpretative valency of her profoundly enthralling paintings.

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