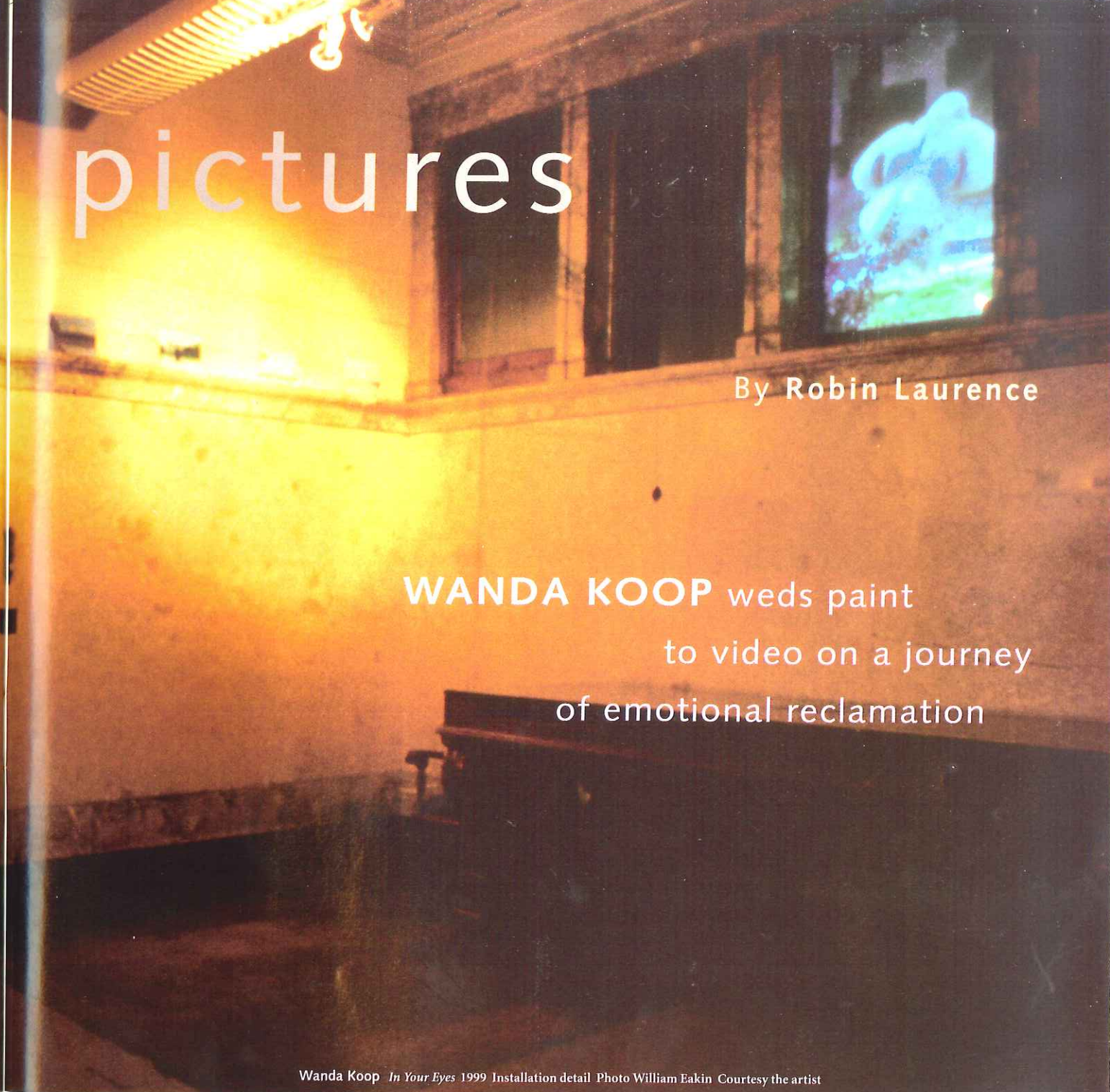
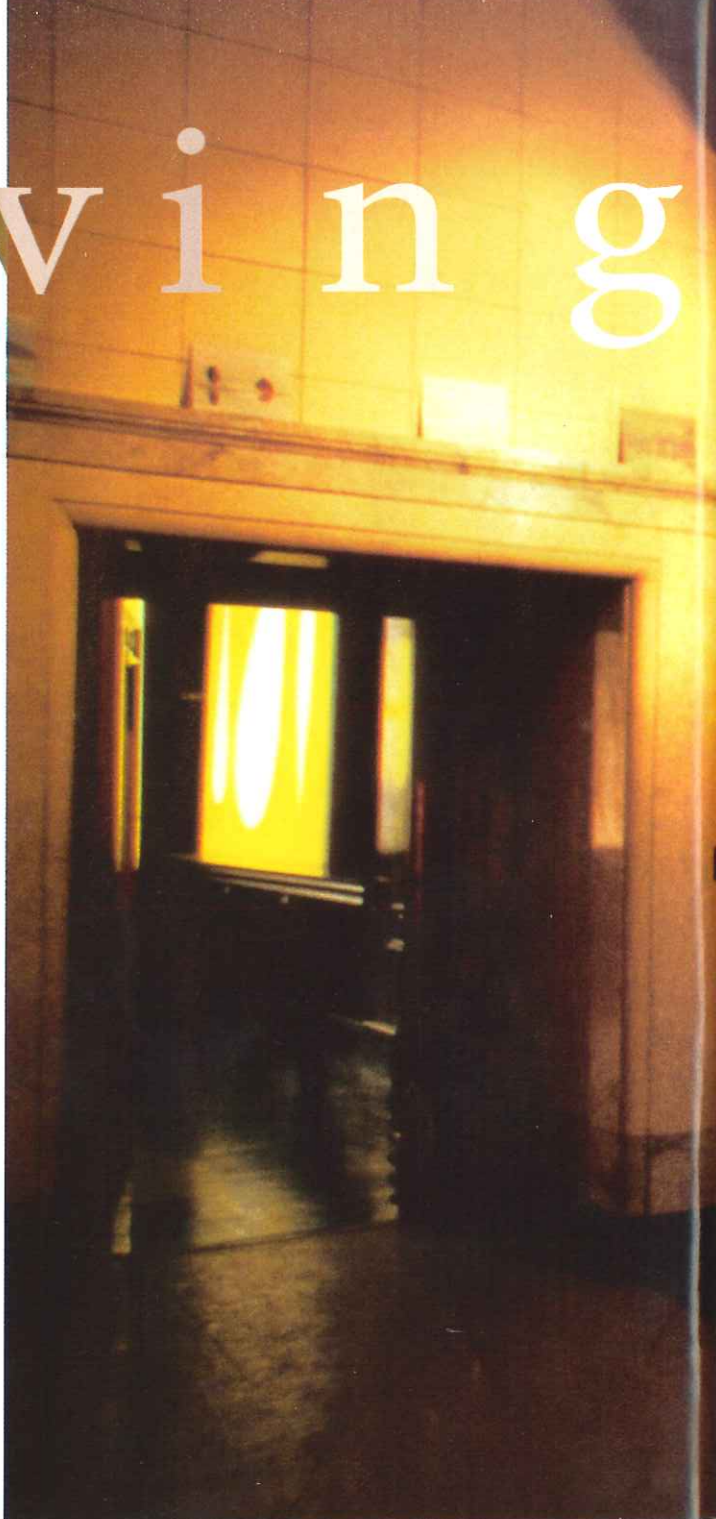


moving pictures

at sunset on a summer night

last year, hundreds of people arrived, invitations in hand, at a neoclassical building on Winnipeg's Main Street. They walked through a revolving door, past two cops, a cameraman and a marble wall engraved with the names of soldiers killed during the First World War, and into a vast banking hall. There, they were struck into hushed stillness by an immensity of aural and visual sensation. Five three-by-four metre paintings, ranging through degrees of abstraction and representation, were mounted high on a U-shaped configuration of black marble countertops. Dramatically lit, they glowed silver, bronze, and acid yellow in the dusky darkness. High above them, four immense video projections shifted like celestial presences—newly discovered constellations of human figures standing, walking, biking, rowing—across the Great Hall's upper corners. In adjacent rooms, two related but smaller installations were staged: a video loop of an albino gorilla in a zoo was projected in concert with some fifty letter-sized paintings, and another painting, domestic in scale, was mounted above a fireplace in a room covered with tapestry wallpaper. Behind the stunning visuals, a soundtrack of sighing and tapping sounds evoked the wind through long grass and a heartbeat inside a stone chamber.

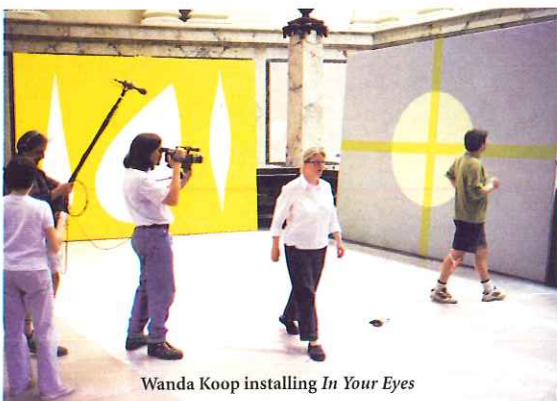
"In Your Eyes," a one-night-only exhibition of work by Wanda Koop, was installed in a 1911 Imperial Bank building which had stood empty for thirty-nine years. In the interstitial moment of Koop's show, her painted and videotaped images played off the architecture of the place, off its echoing immensity, its abandoned splendour, its columns, arches, mouldings, and stained-glass cupola. In that moment, too, Koop's art created the visual climax for *Wanda Koop: In Her Eyes*, a television documentary co-produced by Buffalo Gal Pictures and the National Film Board of Canada. The focus of the documentary—and the source of many of the exhibition's arresting images—was a trip that Koop had taken with her mother to the Crimea and southern Ukraine in the summer of 1997.



By Robin Laurence

WANDA KOOP weds paint
to video on a journey
of emotional reclamation

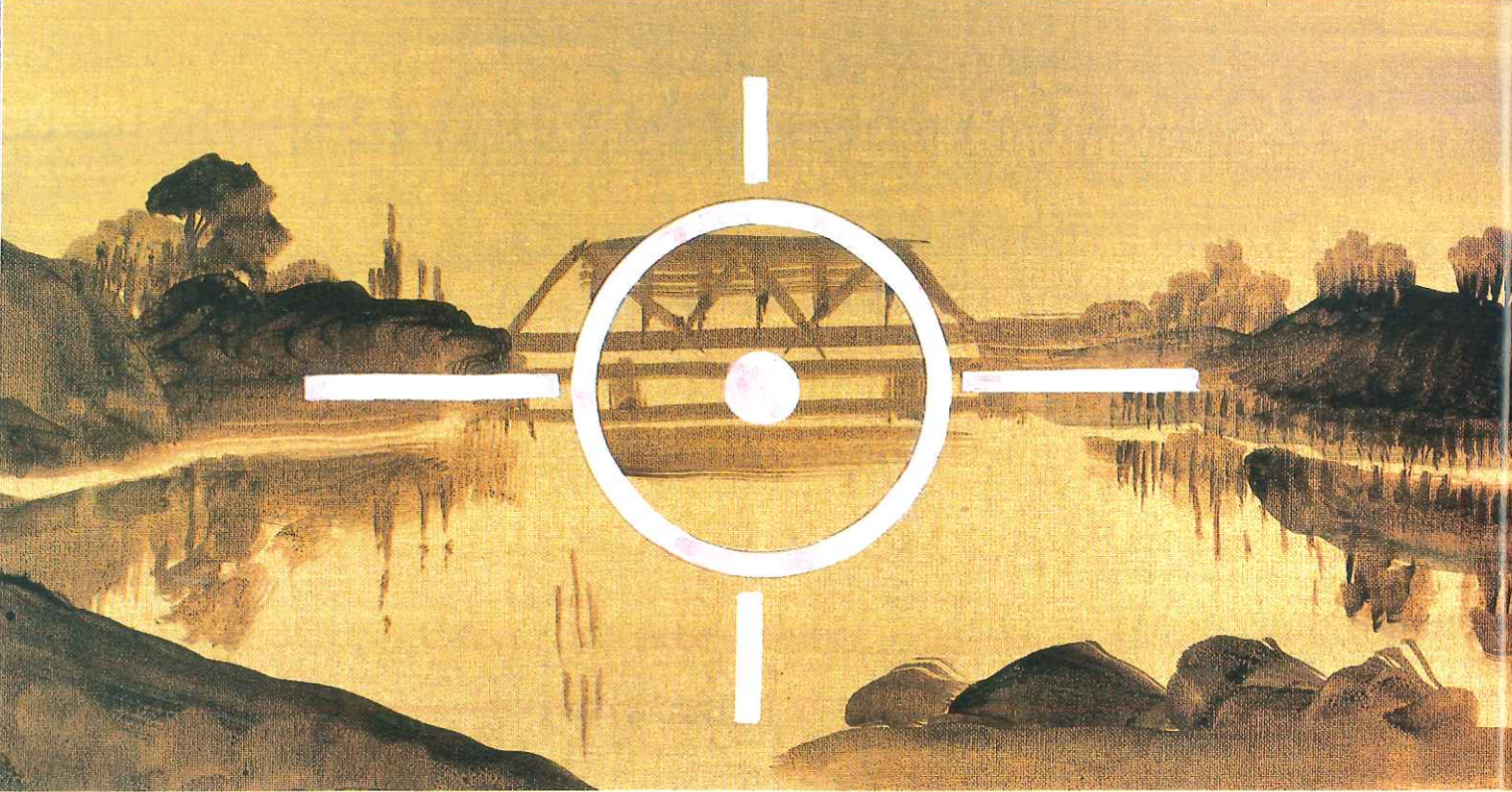
Wanda Koop *In Your Eyes* 1999 Installation detail Photo William Eakin Courtesy the artist



Wanda Koop installing *In Your Eyes*

Koop has often spoken in interviews about the effect on her art-making of her Mennonite upbringing—the condition of watchful alienation, of social and perceptual otherness she developed as a member of an ethno-religious minority. Until recently, however, she has little described in public the themes of displacement and loss that so profoundly informed her early years and that also shaped "In Your Eyes." As children, her parents had been among the tens of thousands of German-speaking Mennonites driven out of southern Russia (now Ukraine) in the nineteen-twenties—victims of an early and brutally effective version of ethnic cleansing. Each had been

pitched from a life of comfort, safety and privilege into conditions of poverty, fear and deprivation, conditions which followed them both as refugees to Canada. Their losses, Koop says, "permeated" her childhood. "My father had seen his father shot and killed and had to wrap rags around his feet and boil plum branches to survive," she recounts, "and yet his grandfather had been a photographer and built a glass house and came from an affluent family." Koop's mother, too, had been born into a family of wealthy landowners reduced to dirt-farm poverty in rural Saskatchewan. The stories each parent told—along with dire admonitions to their children that they might have been



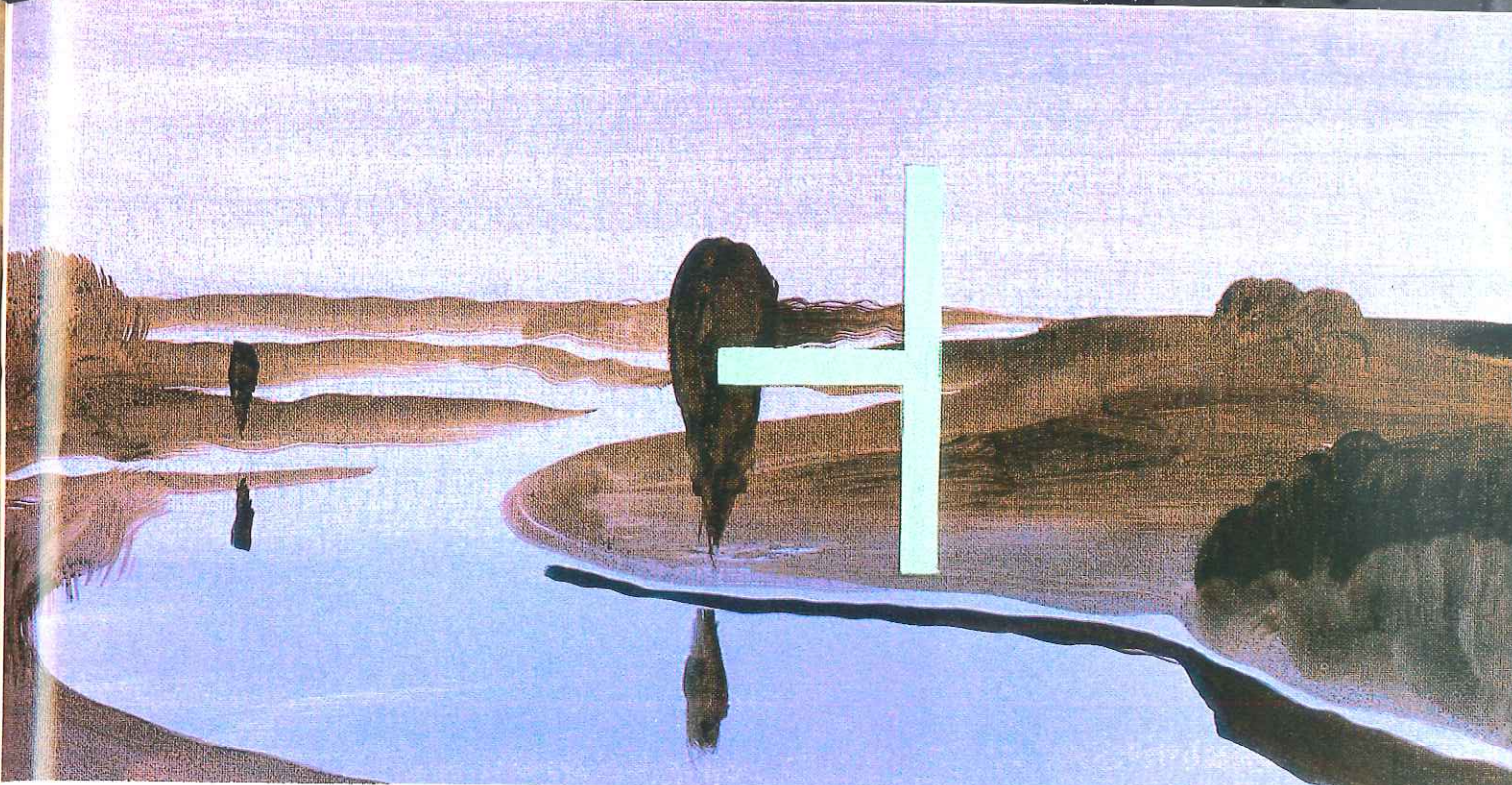
ABOVE: Wanda Koop
Sightlines 1999
 Acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 61.0 cm
 Photo William Eakin
 Courtesy the artist

OPPOSITE: Wanda Koop
Sightlines 1999
 Acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 61.0 cm
 Photo William Eakin
 Courtesy the artist

murdered in Russia or starving in Siberia instead of merely poor in Manitoba—became, Koop says, “like a fearful fairy tale...They had lived so well and they had lost it all.”

The archetypal theme of “paradise lost” combines in Koop’s recent work with a postmodern sense of fragmentation and dislocation. The trip to her grandparents’ estates, schools, hospitals and factories—some derelict, some demolished, others still standing—yielded up not simply a plethora of architectural and landscape images that have since been isolated and abstracted in her paintings and videos (Koop shot twenty hours of videotape during the trip, quite separate from the footage made by the documentary team), but also images of present-day humanity that seem to resonate into the past. The Steinbach estate, where her mother was born and her great-grandparents were shot and killed, now functions as an orphanage. In Koop’s exhibition, video-loop images of two of its inhabitants—a mentally handicapped girl standing in a garden, a physically disabled boy limping toward the camera along a tree-lined path—evoked the pain, damage and displacement experienced by Koop’s parents—and by all refugees. They also spoke to the human spirit, the will to endure. “There’s such resignation in his walk,” Koop says of the young boy, tapping his walking stick along the paving stones, under the dying trees. “Isolation, alienation, survival.”

The other video loops projected at the abandoned bank (the building itself set up a metaphor of lost grandeur and fleeting reclamation) also spoke to themes of isolation, alienation and survival, as did the paintings, large and small. Among Koop’s still images in paint is a misty northern landscape bisected by a Day-Glo yellow cut—a vertical slash spreading as though it were a wound in human flesh rather than pigment on canvas. Other paintings reconfigure forms and motifs that Koop has made iconic: circle and cross-hairs, teardrops, flames. Together, the still and moving images recapitulate a momentous journey, a journey both personal and universal.



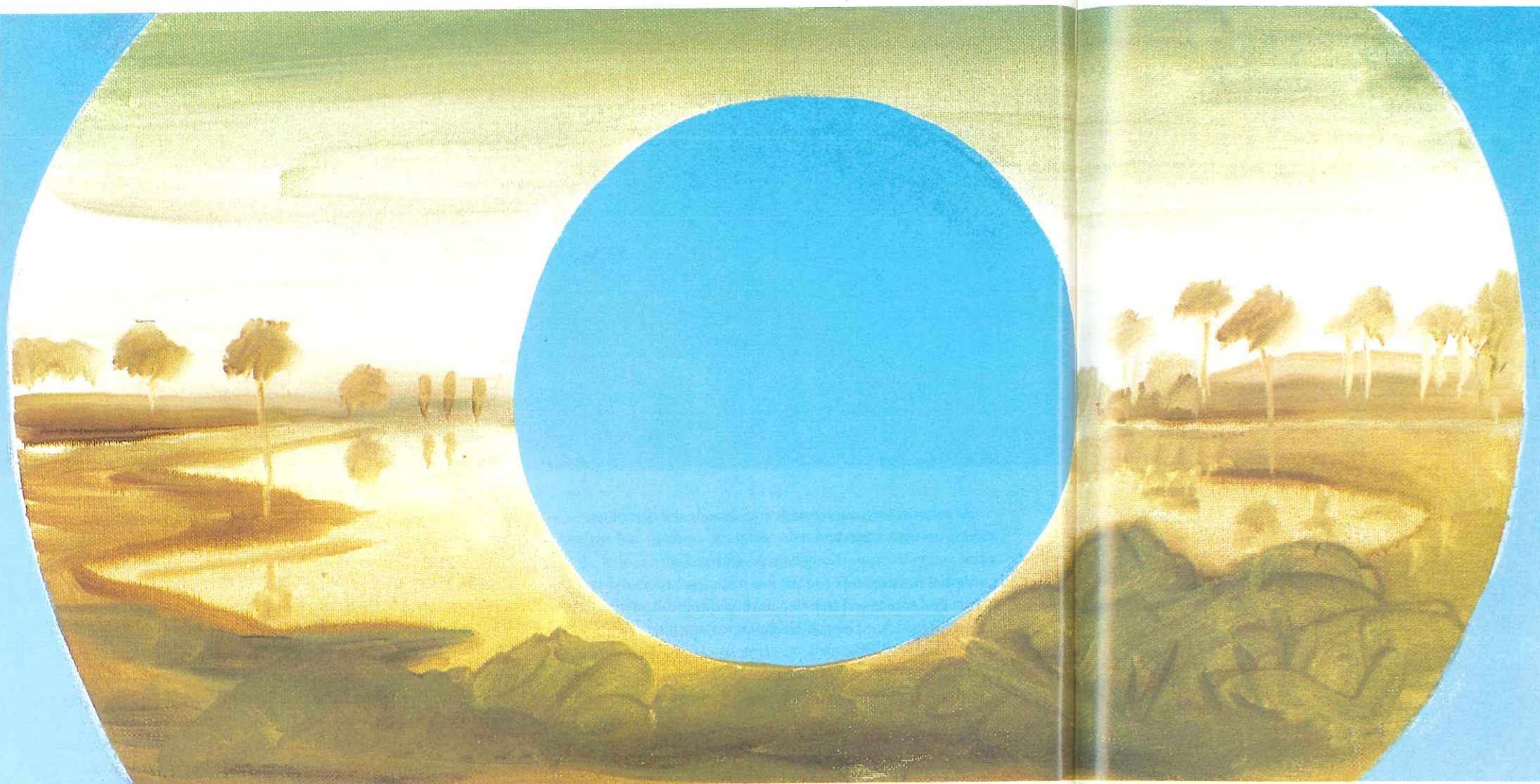
As an artist working across genres, moods and disciplines—mixing up abstraction and representation, emotion and analysis, paint and videotape—Koop has encountered her share of curatorial resistance. For some, it is incomprehensible that such antithetical means and movements should come together in one cohesive artwork. As long as Koop was making film and video notes that merely informed her paintings—something she did for twenty years—the art world could safely applaud her versatility, her keen eye, her visual literacy. As soon as she began incorporating video into her painting installations, employing the two forms as equal and integral aspects of the same art-making impulse, she met resistance. “I’m the only one in Canada, that I know of, who is using video and painting as equal entities,” she says, “treating video as painting and painting as video.” And yet, as both process and product, her way of working makes perfect sense. If in the twentieth century painting was the thesis and video the antithesis, then Koop’s installations are an apt and timely synthesis, a visual dialectic for the new millennium.

Koop has long been acclaimed for the iconic paintings she produces on a grand and fearless scale, acclaimed for the tiny paintings she creates in intimate concert with them, too, and it’s hardly incidental that she was featured on the cover of the premiere issue of *Canadian Art* in the fall of 1984. She seemed then to have been as blessed as she was blond, a prodigy turning out bold, iconic images that both satisfied and unsettled their viewers. At nineteen, while still an art student, she was invited to show six paintings at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and now, at mid-career, she’s got a CV brimming with exhibitions, publications, and awards. She’s been honoured and collected across the country and around the planet, from London to Tokyo and from Edmonton to São Paulo. Which isn’t to say that she doesn’t struggle with recurring cycles of poverty and institutional indifference. As with many of her colleagues, Koop barter paintings for professional services, drives an old car with a cracked windshield,

and shops at thrift stores. But she also travels extensively, exhibits widely, and attracts abundant media attention, giving the impression of a success not necessarily borne out by her bank account. Material or not, Koop’s success seems to have generated some resentment in her home town: a year ago, she was the target of two hateful and knowing acts of vandalism. In one incident, her office was trashed and five new paintings were systematically destroyed. In another, a dead pigeon was found in a box at her studio door. The horror and explicit violence of this act is that it was likely alive when it was sealed within the box.

The episodes remain unsolved (hence the cops at her exhibition opening), but Koop hasn’t allowed herself to be deflected from working. Her studio is crammed with the evidence of her enterprise and her brain teems with new ideas for paintings, drawings and videotapes, installations, books and films. “There’s so much inside of me that I want to do,” she whispers. “I wish there were ten of me.” At least seven of those ten Koops could be marshalled for the community activism and volunteer work she now performs. Maybe it’s that Mennonite background, but it seems Koop is driven to do good deeds, many of them in the inner-city Winnipeg neighbourhood where she’s lived since 1970.

During a particularly frantic period this winter, she travelled to Toronto to open a show of paintings and drawings at the Leo Kamen Gallery, attended the requisite reception and media interviews, then flew to Holland. There, she liaised with a group of Dutch artists who will be exhibiting in Toronto in June, met with friends and curators, and visited the Rotterdam apartment she was instrumental in securing as a European base for a shifting network of Canadian artists. She returned to Winnipeg late one night and spent the next day—from 9:00 A.M. until midnight—in funding meetings and presentations for Art City, the community-art studio which she founded two years ago. The programs of Art City—including workshops in many media for kids and parents, mural projects and other public-art initiatives—are now overseen by



Wanda Koop
Sightlines 1999
 Acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 61.0 cm
 Photo William Eakin
 Courtesy the artist

a full-time co-ordinator, Carla Kematch, but Koop still sits on the creative board of the organization and is deeply involved in fund-raising. She speaks enthusiastically about the impact Art City's programs have had on neighbourhood youth and families, then sighs over the challenges of keeping the studio going financially. "What Art City needs is sustainability," she says. "We need to know there's going to be long-term support for what we're doing."

In the days following her Dutch trip, Koop also had meetings with Gail Ryckman, who works with her in ArtVault, the fine-art reproduction business Koop launched in 1997, not for personal profit but as a means of expanding public awareness of contemporary Canadian art and artists. She met, too, with the board of the West Broadway Development Corporation, the non-profit group which she helped organize to revitalize her decaying neighbourhood, and with which she still serves. During the same period, she corresponded with a flock of curators, dealers, and museum directors, negotiated the terms of a couple of exhibitions, and collaborated with a writer and designer on the first of a planned series of picture books for children.

Koop doesn't teach at a university or college; she directs her

energies toward her volunteer projects. "When you're younger, you make choices about the kinds of work that you're going to do to support your art-making practice," she says. Through her twenties and early thirties, that work was art education for children, through artist-in-residency programs in the public schools and parks and recreation system. "I saw it as a way to survive and also as a way to give back to my community," Koop says, citing the Winnipeg Art Gallery Saturday-morning art classes that were her salvation as a kid. "But I didn't see it as an extension of who I was as an artist." Now, however, when she supports herself entirely through her art-making, she understands that all her activities, volunteer and otherwise, enrich her as a creative being. "What I bring to my art operates on all levels," she explains. "It is social and political as well as visual. And education is a really important component of my painting and video practice."

She sees Art City and ArtVault as functions of the same educational impulse, the same "democracy of seeing" that she proposes in her paintings and videos. Still, from time to time, she speaks of easing out of her volunteer commitments, not only because they are exhausting and relentless, but because she feels

they perpetuate negative stereotypes of artists as people who don't really work. "I think there's an assumption that because I'm an artist, I've got all the time in the world," she says. To compensate for long days spent in meetings, Koop often paints through the night, but feels her ability to sustain her crushing schedule is waning as she ages. "It's not about having spare time," she says. "It's at great cost. It's like having two full-time jobs."

Still, Koop gives the impression of being immensely prolific. Tacked to the walls of her studio are hundreds of new works, including drawings, painted sketches, and scroll after scroll of video stills on thermal paper. Her paintings range from postcard-size on board to wall-size on canvas; some are stacked on tables, some are rolled up in tubes on the floor, and one is occupying the immense, pulley-operated easel that dominates her work space. (It runs on tracks, like a garage door. It's as big as a garage door, too.) Currently, Koop is evolving two separate and ambitious series of paintings. The first, *Sightlines*, again in a range of scales and formats, explores ideas of memory and landscape, the cultural construction of nature, and the accumulated images and motifs which we have learned to link together in a coherent

representation of place: mountains, lakes and forests; flat fields and tree-lined lanes; quiet coves and rocky shores. But Koop is not painting actual forests, fields and coves: hers are reconstructed landscapes, built out of tissues of memory and longing. In many ways, she says, they're more abstract than the big stripes, circles and crosses she also creates in paint. Within the broader cultural construct, Koop has imaged smaller and more particular human inventions: bridges, factories, towers, spires, domes. Some of these structures congregate in a semblance of a small city; others are stranded in a vastness of non-cultivation, a notion of wilderness.

"I'm fascinated by the public's response to landscape, especially people who haven't had access to contemporary art," Koop says. "Their immediate response to a landscape painting is one of comfort." She disrupts the comfort, the familiarity, however, by imposing cross-hairs, brackets, circles, dots and lines—"sight lines"—over the representations of place, thus evoking long-range rifles, video cameras, surveillance devices. Evoking, too, the way electronic technologies are a peculiar condition of the way we now read the world around us, even the "natural" world. "I made a whole book of images of cross-hairs from the Kosovo war," Koop says, remarking with matter-of-fact wonder at the variety of them, gleaned off the television news.

Her second and concomitant series is a continuation of the "In Your Eyes" exhibition and bears the same title. With this ongoing project, Koop is developing more big paintings from her Ukrainian video notes—scores more. At the moment, she envisions showing fifty at once, hung two deep in an immense exhibition space, so that viewers will be utterly surrounded—visually, physically and emotionally. She muses on possible venues, then says, "I have never felt that my work has to be confined to a museum. I think there's a flexibility with all the installations that I do. They can actually go anywhere." As with her awesome—clichés aside, truly awesome—exhibition at the bank, Koop is interested in creating immense, encompassing works that are about more than spectacle. She is interested in expanding the languages of paint and video, integrating into them the complex terms of loss and grief and reclamation. And courage. ■