

THINKING BIG

Wanda Koop's colossal paintings defy the limitless prairie space

BY ROBERT ENRIGHT

Wanda Koop completed her first major painting while in the eighth grade at Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk School. A backdrop for *The Pirates of Penzance*, it measured 20 feet high and 40 feet long. "I painted it in strips," she recalls, "running them through the bedroom, the eating area, through the living room, and then marking the next piece and starting on that and never seeing the whole piece together but just imagining how it was all going to end up. And it worked beautifully."

The scale and obsessive run-on nature of that early project still characterize Wanda Koop's work today. The 33-year-old artist's appetite for constructing large pieces makes her one of the most exciting—and controversial—painters to emerge recently from western Canada. The directness, vibrant palette and impressive physicality of Koop's work led Nancy Tousley, the art critic for the *Calgary Herald*, to call Koop "a force to be reckoned with in current Canadian art." Others have been moved to equally strong reactions. In the visitors' comment book for a 1983 group exhibition called *New Perceptions: Landscapes* at Toronto's Art Gallery at Harbourfront, a would-be critic fumed, "Wanda Koop



Raven (1982), acrylic and Rhoplex on plywood, 224 x 336 cm (8' x 12'). Collection: Diane Keaton

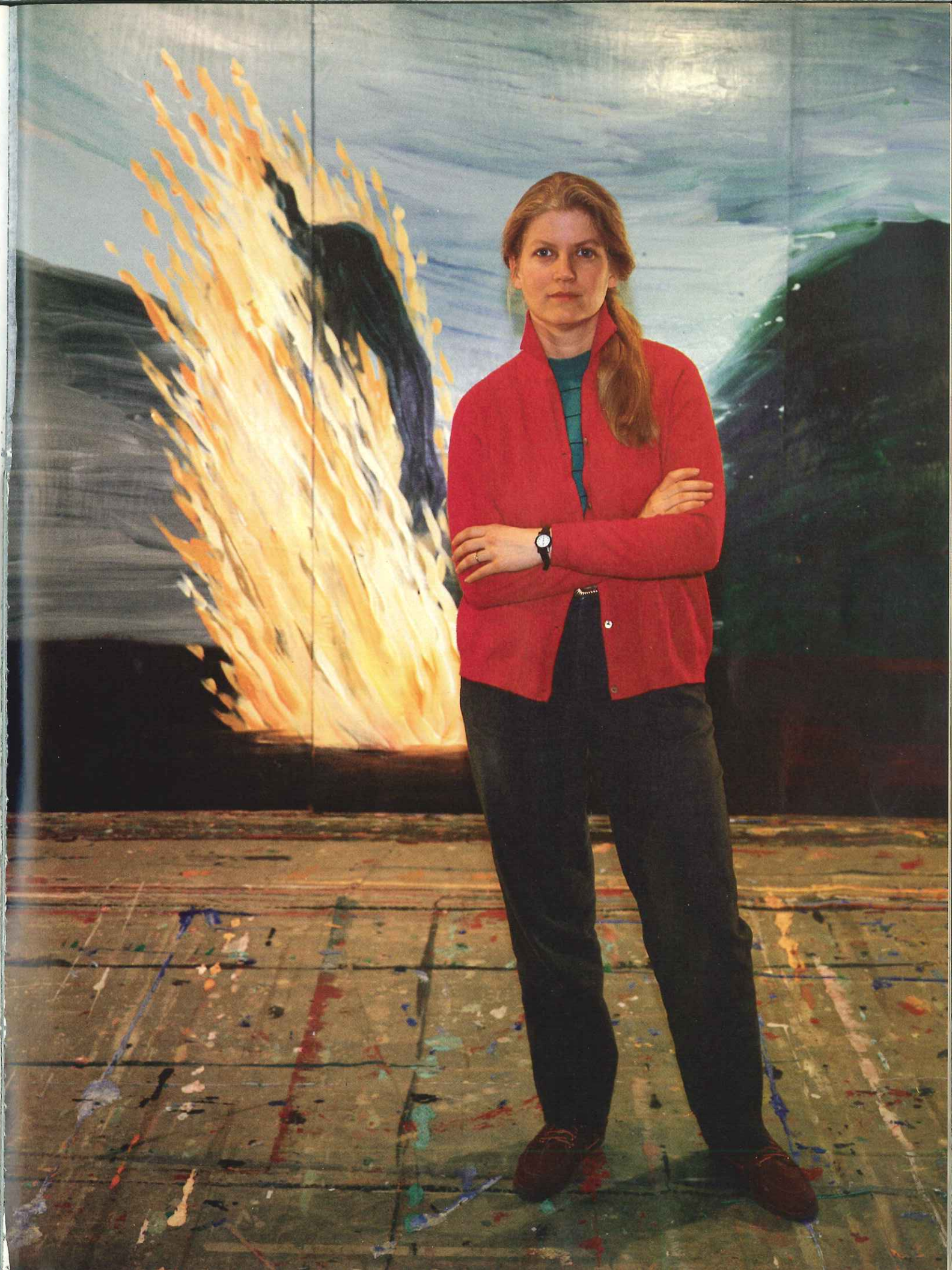
should be publicly hanged."

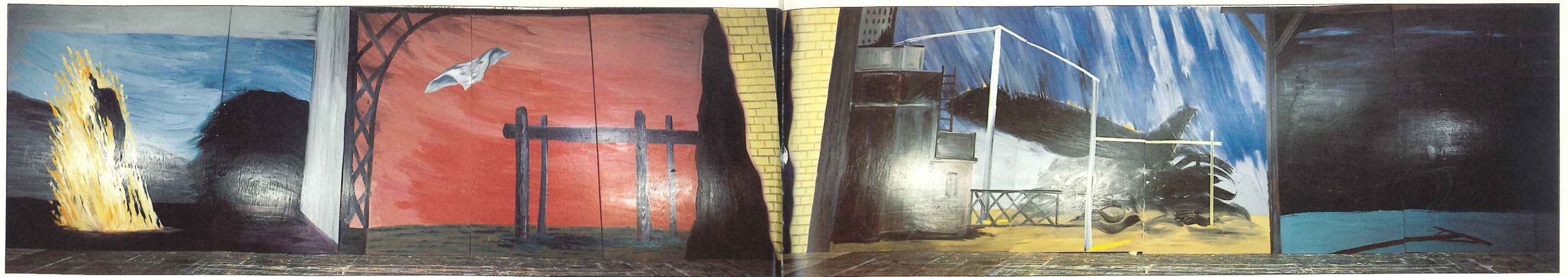
Wanda Koop is often surprised by the intensity of feeling her work provokes. The second oldest of six daughters in a Russian Mennonite family, she was raised in an atmosphere that encouraged creativity (three of her sisters also work in the arts). One of her earliest memories is of an artistic experience: "When I was two years old my father sat down and drew a flower for me. Then I took the pencil and drew a flower, with great fervour, exactly the way he had drawn it. It was then he knew I was

In conversation with Eva Newman, who prepared the introduction to the catalogue for the 1983 *Nine Signs* exhibition at the Glenbow Museum, Koop explained what the raven image meant to her: "I almost drive off the road when I see one; it is beautiful and bright and it evokes fear; it destroys to survive, just as man does; it is the most human animal."

Nine Signs is the last of what Koop calls her "objects for contemplation." Later pieces, including the 52-foot *Wall* (behind Koop at right), are "spaces for contemplation."

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM EAKIN





Wall (1984), acrylic and Rhoplex on plywood, 244 cm x 15.8 m (8' x 52')

Koop calls the four-panel *Wall* her "holocaust painting." It is, she says, "a very anxious painting. It deals with this inexplicable wall of silence that hangs over us." A balance is suggested between apocalyptic events and the eerie calm that follows them.

an artist."

Though the family was poor, Koop and her sisters never lacked materials. Before the family moved from Vancouver in 1953, Koop's father bought the stock of a small paper company for \$10. "We had a closet full of five-by-six rolls of paper," Koop remembers, "and we could go into that cupboard and pull out as much paper as we wanted. It became a very important part of my life."

This almost inexhaustible supply may have contributed to Koop's passion for working on a large scale. (So insistent was her need for material, however, that her mother once gave her cut-up window-blinds to use as a substitute for canvas.) *The Pirates of Penzance* backdrop wasn't her first major project. Earlier in grade school, she created a seven-foot-high flower out of papier-mâché—and was horrified to discover that her classmates and teachers thought her mother had made it.

Koop's background affected her in other ways. She admits that both the practical and spiritual aspects of her religion had a profound influence on her work. Singing in a Mennonite children's choir for 10 years taught her discipline, she says, but involvement with the Mennonite faith provided an even more important lesson: "We were different from everyone else, and I think I figured out pretty early that artists were different from everyone else as well." Koop's religion also imbued her with a sense of the connection between ethics and intense activity, a type of work ethic with spiritual overtones: "I always work with a kind of energy and a basic trust in the goodness of man. It's got to be everything, or it's not worth doing."

This single-mindedness contributed to early recognition of Koop's talent. While she was still in her teens and attending the University of Manitoba (from which she received a fine-art degree in 1973), her inclusion in a cluster of group exhibitions brought her to the attention of such curators and critics as Pierre Théberge, Philip Fry and Terrence Heath, who pronounced her abstract landscapes promising. While Koop today dismisses her gestural, impressionistic works of that period, she acknowledges that working on them gave her an understanding of colour. They also demonstrated two elements that dominate her work: her affinity for working on a large scale and her desire to define prairie space.

To many western artists, the vast space of the prairies seems a leviathan intent on swallowing up their art and sensibilities. But Koop has a strong affection for this region: "When you live on the prairies you have no limitations. You walk out into a horizon that goes on forever and you have this tremendous rush of freedom."

She remains casual about the heroic scale of her work. "I try to make myself very large, like a giant, and I project my giant mind onto the surface so the paintings seem small to me." Accordingly, she now thinks of her series of eight-foot-square paintings on plywood, eight of which were exhibited at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1981, as her "small paintings."

In the summer of 1979, she supervised a "Year of the Child" billboard project sponsored by the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Manitoba Arts Council. Working together with 200 children, she composed nine billboard-sized paintings, one of which she painted herself. Any kind of leisurely viewing was impossible, forcing Koop to think the piece through before committing anything to paper: "I couldn't see what I was doing because it was too

big. I had to conceptualize everything." In the past two years she has completed other projects on a similarly monumental scale—a series of 16-foot-long paintings, the 52-foot-long *Wall*, and *Building*, a 132-foot circular installation—and has entertained the idea of filmmaking because she wants "the whole world as a canvas."

Building is an excellent example of Koop's artist-as-giant approach. Composed of 11 eight-by-12 plywood panels that have a common horizon line and an uncommon palette, the work features simplified versions of building clusters. But perhaps even more remarkable is the story behind the work's installation in the elegant rotunda of the Manitoba Legislative Building. Koop originally composed *Building* as 11 separate paintings. They were intended to be installed as a single piece, ideally in a continuous line. But when she saw the rotunda, poetically called the Pool of the Black Star, her sense of the work was completely altered, and she embarked on a phone and letter campaign seeking permission to exhibit *Building* there. Koop's simple, unadorned, accessible images appealed to Eugene Kostyra, the province's populist Minister of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, and he readily acceded. After some ambitious carpentry, Koop's remarkable urban painting fit into the space as if it had been made for it. She now thinks of it as a circular painting.

When installed, *Building*, with its support scaffolding, was reminiscent of a construction site. This tendency to transform the art of painting into the act of constructing environments—if only for imaginary habitation—has increasingly characterized Koop's recent work. More and more she considers her works as three-dimensional objects: her 1980 series of tarpaulin paintings hung with pulleys and winches suggested theatrical backdrops; her recent 16-foot acrylic-on-plywood paintings will be installed as freestanding panels; Koop sees

Wall and her eight-by-12 airplane paintings as a single, complementary installation, with the airplane pieces hung at different heights and the sectioned *Wall* painting functioning as a counterbalance on the ground. Sometimes in encountering her work you feel you're in the presence of an architect *manquée* or a stage designer for a playbill entirely of her own devising. "I always have the installation in mind," says Koop.

Central to Koop's development are the extended trips she and her second husband, photographer William Eakin, undertake. (Up until 1981 she was known professionally by her first husband's name, Condon.) They crossed Canada five times in as many years and in the summer of 1980 logged 4,000 miles in Manitoba, on a journey that eventually inspired the eight-foot-square plywood series. The trips are adventures and research excursions rolled into one: on separate expeditions to British Columbia, Koop studied the work of Emily Carr and researched Haida art. "I call it my time for collecting acorns," she says, "so that in winter I have something to really work from."

Like everything else Koop does, this collecting process is highly organized. She makes visual notes while travelling, jotting down images that catch her attention. When she and Eakin stop for the night, she transfers the images that "still stand up at a glance" onto small panel boards, working with paint to develop these visual notations. It was an extension of this process that led to the *Nine Signs* exhibition at

Bird contains hints of vulnerability—the poles threaten to close in, the bird's wing is positioned so that it is compositionally and metaphorically broken—and yet it is also an affirmation.

Calgary's Glenbow Museum last fall: "When we got back to Winnipeg, I started working on large, very graphic charcoal drawings and then selected images that were personally important to me. Nine out of the 60 seemed to hold something other than being passing images. They became symbols or metaphors for something else."

Despite her phenomenal output, Koop is a cautious, even conservative, painter. Through her painstaking work process she has devised a visual language—she describes it as an "alphabet of symbols"—that is personally and universally resonant. Her first series of image sequences—14 drawings, each on a 12-foot-long sheet of paper—was completed in 1981. She called the series *Symbols and Associations*, and its simple, clearly drawn common objects—a shell, a bridge, a raven on a post, a leaf or a sign—became her own visual syntax. It's as if the linear form of the series was an attempt to find a metaphor for the lengthy highway journey that provided the images in the first place.

While the letters in Koop's alphabet of symbols may be comparatively easy to recognize, they are not always easy to read. Looking at them is like perusing a book in a foreign language—you may have glimmerings of recognition, but nothing you could describe as comprehension. Koop says she can make beautiful paintings if she wants to, but she has opted for direct, immediate communication. Her works are deliberately crude; she makes no attempts to disguise or cosmetically repair the nature of her nontraditional materials—knotholes in plywood, seams in tarpaulins, ridges of Rhoplex all remain visible. Koop's paintings display a kind of rough-edged pride: they are the self-assured bulls-in-the-china-shop of contemporary Canadian painting.

This is not to suggest that Koop's work is unsophisticated. Her paintings are like elaborate chess games she conducts with herself, spatial analogues for mysterious, inarticulate recognitions. The lyrical side of her painting shares the tone, but not the scale, of the inexplicably serene still lifes of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi; the



Bird (1984), acrylic on plywood, 244 x 366 cm (8' x 12')



Much as photographers select their best work from contact sheets, Koop makes many sketches, then chooses the images "that are important to me." It is through this process that she has developed her alphabet of symbols, a visual syntax that is personally and universally resonant.

darker side is reminiscent of the brooding piazzas of early de Chirico, or the disturbing symbology of Philip Guston's late work. As in the paintings of these predecessors, we may recognize objects or places—a wreath, a hayroll, an airplane, a seascape viewed from an interior, a fragmented landscape—but we are still obliged to ask questions about their contexts. In any Koop series from the past four years, the viewer can locate these ambiguous areas; the paintings insinuate a connected visual

narrative and then deliberately set out to frustrate that expectation.

These are cultivated confusions: Koop shifts back and forth between real space and illusory space, between conventional, public symbols and abstract, personal ones. We often don't even know the precise nature of the object we're seeing. In a recent two-part painting with the uncooperative title *Thing and Mountain*, what is the object to the left of the formidable black mountain? A detail of the ornate dome on an Eastern European church? A gigantic stopper for an exotic perfume bottle? For that matter, what in the name of perspective is the mountain doing in the

painting at all? Or the "thing" in the mountain's range? The effect of this insecurity—almost a painterly-induced vertigo—is visceral. It's a feeling produced in part by the inconsistencies of scale. We don't know how big we are in relation to the objects and space in the painting.

There is in Koop's works what Fernand Léger called "the beauty of the fragment." Significantly, *Fragments* (from the recent 16-foot acrylic-on-plywood series) is among Koop's most enigmatic paintings. Set against a blood-red sky and a nondescript black horizon is a quartet of vaguely recognizable objects: the tail section of an airplane, the bottom of a mountain, a section of a massive tree trunk and the corner of a building.

In fact, the visual discontinuities of

works such as *Fragments* and *Thing and Mountain* were suggested by the necessity of moving the four-by-eight sheets of plywood around the studio. (Koop's large work space on the fifth floor of a downtown Winnipeg office building is like a combined lumberyard and building centre: drawings are laid out on the floor like pieces of a huge patchwork quilt, large vinyl tarpaulins are rolled up in the corners and sections of plywood paintings are stacked everywhere.) In the process of moving a painting or showing people her work, Koop often found herself arbitrarily placing a section of one painting beside an unrelated portion of another or removing one sheet of plywood to reveal another underneath. The visual surprise of this activity was the basis of a compositional

strategy she calls "fracturing."

It's difficult to predict where this kind of visual deconstruction will lead, but it has already given us a clue about Koop's affinities. If we want to understand these paintings, we are far safer on the imprecise road to surrealism than on the logical path to cubism. Koop hints at the distinction when she says that her works up to and including *Nine Signs* are "objects for contemplation," whereas her subsequent works are "spaces for contemplation." In them Koop has achieved a broader psychological range than ever before. As she says, "The new paintings are more like dreams."

A good deal of Koop's compulsion to paint arises from her need to drive out personal demons; painting, for her, is simultaneously a reminder of danger and a kind of exorcism. In her 12-by-13-foot Rhoplex-on-vinyl series she neutralized her fear of mountains ("driving through them I was so petrified I could hardly breathe") by transforming them into stately, symmetrical objects. "I'm always afraid the world is ending," Koop says, "so what some of these paintings represent is that cold, isolating fear in the mind."

The airplane series represents by far the most ambitious purging to date. Koop's fear of flying provoked this series, which began as notes on airplanes taking off, became large charcoal drawings, then five-by-six paintings on paper and finally large eight-by-12 paintings—a varied and suggestive body of work that indicates how inventive a painter she is. Koop regards the plane as the "greatest universal symbol of our mortality" and suggests that it occupies as central a place in her work as the "Walking Woman" does in Michael Snow's. Because of the emotional complexity the image of the plane holds for her and the formal qualities it offers her as a painter, the airplane series powerfully invites a multitude of interpretations. She has rendered the plane as a fat-bodied blimp, an improbable speedboat, a huge shark and as a sort of malevolent sliver in the sky. She allows it to float in clear skies, leave behind a mass of exhaust or be the centre of a vibrating atmosphere of paint.

Koop's tendency to hold the sword of Damocles over her own head reaches a zenith in *Wall*, the 52-foot environmental piece she also calls her "Holocaust painting." The combination of reading a book on spontaneous combustion, seeing an effigy being burned on TV and thinking about the Berlin Wall provoked both the imagery and form of the painting. The pictures in its four sections are only sublimi-

nally related. A balance is suggested between apocalyptic events and the eerie calm that follows them. In panels one and three Koop represents human incineration and an airplane crash, while in panels two and four, she depicts a flag blowing away from a deserted dock and the shadow of a telephone pole on a prairie landscape. *Wall* doesn't simply express the tension characteristic of current international relations; it presents its most horrific implications. It might be a view of what the world looked like through the submarine periscope in *On the Beach*, haunting in its stillness, almost serene. "It is a very anxious painting," Koop says. "It deals with this inexplicable wall of silence that hangs over us."

Still, the vision of the future in *Wall* is not unremittingly bleak but fluctuates between despair and celebration. While the last panel shows the shadow of a telephone pole in front of a black, implacable sky, it's important to remember Koop's belief that "shadows are a measure of the energy of things."

Despite her painterly ruminations on the fate of the earth, Koop retains an infectious aesthetic optimism: "I really feel I can do everything and anything." One of her latest paintings, *Bird*, is a gorgeous affirmation in the midst of Koop's dark dreams. In one way, it counters the perverse malevolence of her technological flying things; in another, it reminds us that our very vulnerability is a source of beauty and strength. *Bird* is an exceptionally moving painting. Its varnished blue, green and lavender plumage resonates against a smudgy matte background. She now sees it as an autobiographical fragment, an unconventional self-portrait.

The painting, however, is not without its warnings. The bird is frightened and watchful, apprehensive about the poles that appear to be closing in from the edges of the outside panels. Despite its scale and uncluttered composition, *Bird* is a curiously claustrophobic painting. Koop has positioned the wing of the bird on a panel seam so that it is compositionally and metaphorically broken. But despite these suggestions of vulnerability *Bird* is a voluptuous act of faith amid the imagined ruins of our world.

She believes it is a charmed painting. When she was working on it, a pigeon appeared in her studio, somehow getting in through the skylight. "And that," she says in a tone of gentle defiance, "has never happened before." □

Robert Enright is the western correspondent for CBC's *Stereo Morning* and edits *Arts Manitoba*, a quarterly arts review.