

## VISUAL ART

## Gina Rorai

by James D Campbell



The governing telos behind Gina Rorai's numinous paintings emerged into the foreground once again with this exhibition of her recent work. Writing on her work almost eight years ago in these pages, I pointed to her tenacity as a rare artistic trait, and her sense of purpose a virtually inviolable promise. Here is a painter dead set on pursuing her project beyond the fail-safe point, undistracted by whimsy or fashion or the mute appeals of the market, standing her ground, standing fast.

Rorai deftly grafts emotions onto quotidian objects—say, the objects we all live with at home—and redeems those domestic icons from time, necessity and circumstance. Her paintings awaken something sleeping deep inside us. I mean this in terms of what Marcel Proust said in *Swann's Way* about the thirst for something other than what we have, maybe other than what we are, and she delivers something new and strange and hypnotic in its way. I did find that these recent paintings were overwhelmingly leavened with undercurrents of sorrow. (The painter's father died late 2013 and one wonders if this influenced her practice.) The

viewer's sensibility wants to resonate under her hand, but in her case, and unlike Proust's suggestion, it is not a rough or idle hand. It is a measured one that caresses memories to smoothness, awakening the sleeper in each of us.

Once again, she improbably conjoins interior still life and exterior landscape on the original plane and induces a sort of reciprocal vertigo of that same plane, while making the final painting surpassingly ambiguous. The elements are abutted vertically like Venetian blinds that reveal the shallow space behind them.

Her mastery of scale is as impressive as ever; some of the smallest paintings are her most eloquent. In works like *Casual Frontier*, Rorai stacks brush strokes in sensuously fractal fashion laterally, and in *The Colour in a Shade*, she interleaves them vertically like a slow Barnett Newman zip extended across the surface in earthy smudge-like fashion. The long vertical paintings such as *Ornamental Balconies* and *The One to the Sea* are of particular interest, the scale so effectively compressing the near and the far, the seen and the unseen.

Rorai has spoken of wanting to achieve tone through colour.



This reminds me of jazzman Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* in which he wrestled out of brute silence tones or sketches for each song instead of simply writing them. Similarly, Rorai's colour choices, which can vary widely in a given painting, lay out a foundation, and she builds upon this with textures of internal light and tremulous brush stroking. Her emotive delivery is predicated upon her choice of colours, and what she does to them in the real-time application of their juxtaposition.

Miles Davis's friend, the gifted composer George Russell, devised a new theory of jazz improvisation in the 1950s based not on chord changes but on scales or modes. This new species of music was often called modal jazz in which you could, for instance, play all the notes of a scale, which is to say any and all notes. Here was the genesis of the breakthrough album *Kind of Blue*. Russell held that it is for the musician to sing his own song without having to meet the deadline of a particular chord. He argued you are free to do anything so long as you know where home is. Gina Rorai is a painter who always knows where home is.

In *The Last Evening* it is as though Rorai is shoring fragments against her ruins, building a very special mnemonic palace for

1. Gina Rorai, *The Last Evening* 2014, oil on canvas, 165 x 100 inches. All images courtesy Corbin Gallery, Toronto.

2. *The Path of Appearance*, 2014, oil on canvas, 96 x 120 inches.

herself—and for us—among them. In the glorious *Symbols of the Real* the sensuous self-presence of her offerings is embedded in the palpable hush of luminosity that almost takes your breath away. The table with its bowl of fruits, the fabric shawl, the paintings on the wall that are either paintings, or maybe not paintings but windows on the infinite, all yielded depth markers of a robust emotive life. Adjacent textures never clash, and the chromatic halo draws us into a continuously unfolding dream space. Here is a painter capable of generating an uncanny intimacy. I can understand why Bonnard is foremost among her avatars: he was an unshamed painter of pleasure and intimacy, a hedonist of a sublime persuasion. But sorrow is still felt everywhere in his work. "The minute one says one is happy, one isn't any more," Bonnard noted in a 1939 diary entry. I can imagine Rorai endorsing this sentiment. ■

"*The Path of Appearance*" was exhibited at Corbin Gallery, Toronto, from September 3 to October 12, 2014.

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## "Who Counts? A Feminist Throwdown"

by Lois Klassen

Noted Canadian psychoanalyst and writer Jeanne Randolph wrote: "For, in our time so many surreal things have become normalized, that it is hard to find that [idiosyncratically fearful image or idea...that thunders and stops your pulse]" (*The Critical Object [Digital Redux]*, Platform Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, 2009). It might seem contrary to you fear as a starting point for a review of the events that celebrated 30 years of operations for Winnipeg's MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art). Collegial hilarity and cohesion would more accurately describe the mood of this important multi-generational gathering of Canadian feminist writers, curators and artists. The opening quote is from *The Critical Object [Digital Redux]*, the Platform gallery publication that was slipped into a gift bag from MAWA organizers for those of us who had travelled to attend "Who Counts? A Feminist Throwdown." Its psychoanalytical provocation made me attentive to the way many of the artworks in the MAWA-linked exhibitions in Winnipeg, Portage La Prairie and Brandon managed to thunder and stop the pulse. So though the sometimes-satirical symposium events produced fresh insights (into the latest Pop appropriation of feminist subjectivity in a talk by Stephanie Poruchnyk-Butler and Sigrid Dahl, for example) and opened spaces (through an intersectional critique of any lingering "community" cohesion in Sharlene Bambo's panel presentation), I will focus here on the exhibitions that carried the celebration of MAWA throughout the region.

One of the first pieces I saw when I arrived in Winnipeg for

the festivities was Elaine Stocki's photograph *Nudes Moving an Abstract Painting 2* in the exhibition "Candid: Karen Asher, Maya de Forest, Laura Letinsky, Elaine Stocki" at the Platform gallery. A black and white print, it neutralizes the instrumentalizing of women's bodies as subjects in both studio art and studio work. In a commissioned text for the exhibition, Kendra Place describes how this photograph appeared to her in a frightful dream, and led her to this summation: "How often we are (how often are we?) differently deprived of our autonomies." A sense of unsettled autonomies is produced by a number of works in this exhibition marking a trajectory of women's photography, beginning with Laura Letinsky's early figurative photos. The ambiguity of consent surrounds Maya de Forest's photos of a mother's private Flamenco practice seen through her daughter's camera, and Karen Asher's staging of a heaviest man who is shown to be leaning in dependence on someone much smaller.

Going back to Randolph's Freudian appeal, pulse-stopping fear hits us cold, especially when the repressed is triggered. Ruth Cutthand's suite of drawings "Misuse is Abuse," 1990, in her retrospective at Plug In ICA produces such a release. I recall the affective punch that this work delivered when I first saw it—even though it was shown then as slide projections in her artist's talk at "First Person Plural," 2000, another MAWA symposium. In drawings of various sizes and configurations, figures identifiable as First Nations speak back to a dominating and fear-inducing "white liberal." Created at the time of exploratory talks leading