

Margaret Coe: Light, Woods, and River Flow

October 23 - November 30, 2024

Opening Reception: Saturday, October 26th, 2:00 – 4:00 pm, with Artist Talk at 2:30 pm

First Friday Artwalk: November 1st, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present *Light, Woods, and River Flow*, powerful new works by venerable Eugene painter Margaret Coe. This series of large and medium-sized oils on canvas, mostly created within the last two years, focuses on her experience and interpretation of the woods behind her home in Southeast Eugene and of a cherished spot on the Calapooia River. According to the artist herself, “there’s a lot of experimentation, and these paintings also feel more autobiographical.” This is also what she wryly calls her “Walden experience, being on your own with the landscape, using that like a meditation.” A consummate painter, Coe finds here another opportunity to explore the dynamic tension between the formal components of her compositions. At the same time, she imbues both subject matter and formal elements with symbolic significance, and her work often acquires a spiritual dimension, notably through her glorious portrayal of light.

Light, suffused or fiery, in the morning or at sunset, filtered through clouds or reflected on water, is a primary character in these paintings. Coe gives it a substance, a role, and a meaning that is often one of transcendence. It is at times otherworldly. What Coe captures isn’t just closely observed nature, but her very experience of being in the woods or by the river at different moments of the day. As is often the case with Coe, her concern with light started out with a formal investigation into ways of approaching light in painting. An immersive Tate Britain 2014 exhibit, *Late Turner – Painting Set Free*, made a deep and lasting impression on her. She remembers saying to herself: “I can’t have had the experience of being so moved by light in a painting without coming away thinking about light and how I’m going to present light as a priority.”

Coe’s initial on-site pieces are later reinterpreted in the studio. As alluded to in the titles, they are often further enriched with metaphorical or symbolic meaning that emerges from an ongoing dialogue between the artist and her canvas (*Emergence, Fragility*). The symbolism may be deeply personal: in *Two Old Souls*, two whitened firs, the tallest trees behind her house, represent Coe and the artist Mark Clarke, her late husband. Meanwhile, in *Standing Tall*, Clarke’s figure appears to soar next to the one remaining fir, a “tribute to his size and his ethicalness.” At times, a painting will evolve in Coe’s mind into a full allegory (*Deep Waters*). Throughout the entire series, there is a strong intimation of a deeply felt interconnection between the natural, human, and spiritual realms. Nothing is ever fully explicit, however. Coe suggests but preserves mystery. Viewers are free to do their own exploration, insert their own metaphors and if they wish, make their own allegorical interpretations.

Coe has also been experimenting with textures, and this is part of a broader concern with achieving a plurality of dynamic contrasts among formal elements. She compares some of those textures to what can be achieved in printmaking. Some serve as a way of “translating” a knot of branches, trees and brush in the distance, sometimes rocks. The function of these textures is essentially suggestive, and they’re particularly convincing in areas that are not the focal point and are meant to be less defined. They’re often an invitation for the viewer’s imagination to wander with delight into enigmatic territories or seemingly unexplored depths.

Other types of textures allow a single landscape element, such as a particular tree or rock, to stand out from its surroundings. Coe uses each kind of texture very selectively, as a foil for the areas painted with detailed precision, or in contrast with smoother or softer areas where paint has been carefully applied. They also add a sensorily gratifying tactile dimension. For Coe, “there’s something dynamic in a visceral way” about textural contrast, just as with color contrast. “I like my painting to produce a physical kind of visceral reaction, not just from the content, but also from the contrast of textures.” She wants the physical nature of the paint, and the way it is applied, to bring forth the same feeling or sensation that the subject matter elicited in the first place.

In conjunction with bold color and value contrasts, forms are often simplified or abstracted to heighten their own contrasting power. A great deal of attention is paid to negative spaces (*Tree Spirit, The Edge*). Verticals, horizontals and diagonals organize the canvas, direct the viewer’s gaze around the painting, and play against one

another. While operating structurally, they also convey metaphorical meaning, for instance by establishing a connection between salient landscape elements (*Emergence, Prayer, Crossing A Raging River*). In the latter, says Coe, “there’s that tension between the energizing hope of the sunburst, the leaning trees, and the threatening river.” In the Calapooia River paintings, a funnel-shaped sky mirrored by the meandering river is a recurrent pattern, and the colors of water and sky often echo each other.

In a Coe painting, calm areas are often set against activated ones. In *Rocks and Water*, the texture of the dark rocks plays against that of the whitewater gushing among them, both elements set against an unperturbed, undefined background. A yellow pool in the lower left corner echoes the light in the upper part of the painting while acting as a counterpoint to the rocks. *Deep Waters* also offers a high contrast between a dramatic foreground of large river boulders in reds, browns, and ochres, and a cooler background with water, sky, and trees lightly suggested. A human eye could not take in the horizon, the rocks and the pool at the bottom all at once, and the combination of these three planes into a single image provides another dynamic tension. The same is true of *Immersion*, which fuses three different preliminary drawings representing the fore-, middle- and background respectively. *Calapooia Rock Forms*, which incorporates many of these formal tensions, is a striking example of these multiple dynamics at work.

Coe also makes the most of the existing contrasts in her environment: raw, scraggly forms “can be poignant in contrast with more lush parts of the landscape,” she notes. Elsewhere, dramatic sunbursts illuminate the bare bones of tall trees. In *Old soul*, the sky, lit almost white, meets the dark tangled understory, while an ancient oak, its limbs reaching up toward the sky, embodies both decline and dignity. In *Prayer*, as the sun rises, one of its rays touches a decaying tree. “I could identify with that, aging,” says Coe. “And it was about the power of prayer to connect with something so decaying.” Oblique strands of clouds and landforms reach toward each other in *Fantasia*, and for Coe, “ethereal nature interacting with something very earthbound has an almost erotic energy to it.”

One particular hallmark of Coe’s work is her love of experimentation and capacity for renewal. Since the 1960s, roughly every decade of her long career as an artist has corresponded to a different period, each markedly different from the others. Initially influenced by her instructor David McCosh, but also by such Oregon modernists as C.S. Price and Charles Heaney, she started out as a post-impressionist Northwest landscape artist and wholly embraced her identity as a regional painter. Next, during her MFA (1976-1978), with Frank Okada as her advisor, she experimented with abstraction.

Throughout the 1980s, she introduced landscape elements into the abstract shapes of her paintings, creating fantasy places that brought together personal dream imagery of ancient times and fragments of the fugitive present. In the 1990s, teaching color theory brought a complete change in subject and style, initiating the two concomitant (and very successful) *City Street* and *Blues* series, in which she “sorted out abstract shapes out of city street scenes” and used color theory to structure her compositions. A trip to Italy followed by multiple residencies in France in the years 2000 started a new period that was dominated by the *Village* series.

Coe, who moved to Oregon as a teenager, started painting at a young age. After high school, she enrolled at the University of Oregon, where she studied under David McCosh and Jack Wilkinson, earned a BA in art education, and met Mark Clarke, then an MFA student, whom she soon married. Her career as a professional artist immediately took off. She returned to the University of Oregon for an MFA in painting, which she obtained in 1978, and taught at the University of Oregon and Lane Community College until retirement, all the while exhibiting extensively in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. She has been the recipient of many awards and Oregon Percent for Art commissions. Her work features in numerous museums and public collections in the US and abroad. In 2017-2018, along with her late husband, painter Mark Clarke, she was honored at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art with a retrospective exhibit accompanied with a fully illustrated catalogue.

Sylvie Pederson