

Mara Korkola is a Finnish-Canadian painter

Reviewing a recent show, *The Globe and Mail* called Mara "a greatly gifted painter". .

She paints landscapes. When she was younger, she painted the rock and lakes and forests of Northern Ontario, where she grew up. Nowadays Mara paints different kinds of landscape, the streets of a city at night, the runways of an airport in winter. As the *Globe and Mail* says, "Runways are just barely landscapes, but Korkola gives them an otherwise overlooked presence and character. Despite their seeming emptiness, they teem with incident."

Meet Mara inside this issue of Kaiku/Echo



Mara Korkola, Winter was hard 7 (detail) 2007, oil on 7.5" x 11" aluminum panels, triptych



Mara Korkola

by Allan Tyyskä

No place 171 (detail) 2007, oil on 7.5" x 11" aluminum panels, triptych. Described by reviewers as "Patsy Cline in oils," and "moody miniature nocturnes," the No Place paintings show glimpses of traffic in lonely in-between places, passed through as night is falling.

Mara Korkola is an artist, a painter whose work has been shown in Canada, the United States, Spain and Germany. Her parents, Myra (née Semelius) and Allan, grew up in the Finnish community in Timmins. Her grandmother Elma (Semelius, and later, Anttila) was celebrated in Timmins, Toronto and Thunder Bay as a singer and actress.

Where were you born?

I was born in 1965 on the north shore of Lake Superior, in a small pulp and paper company town called Marathon. Then, when I

was seven the family moved north to Geraldton, a defunct gold-mining town, on the northernmost highway across Ontario. When I was young, I was mostly interested in drawing and sports.

Do you feel any connection to your Finnish roots?

Absolutely, I was raised in Northern Ontario by first generation Canadians, with Finnish customs and foods, hearing the language, having saunas, going skiing, and surrounded by great design (glass and tableware, vases, tapestries, jewelry, etc.) And lots of wood...

Your mother, Myra, has painted watercolour landscapes as long as I've known her, and a painting of a sauna beside a lake by your grandmother, Elma, hangs on the wall of my library. Did your mother and grandmother have any impact on you as an artist?

Of course. They were always painting. There were always new paintings leaning against the walls – it made painting seem like a very normal, acceptable pursuit, or rather, something valid and meaningful to do with your time.

Where did you study?

I studied art at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and took a year of Biomedical Communications at the University of Toronto. Later, I went to Wichita State University in Kansas for a bachelor's degree in Fine Art and the University of Texas at San Antonio for a master's degree in Fine Art.

Who were the greatest influences on your development as a painter?



Hugh MacKenzie, my third year painting instructor at the College of Art was one – I still have his method and his words in my head. The following year I went to Florence, Italy for a year of independent study. Later, at the University of Texas, visiting artist Susan Hall assigned me the project of researching living landscape painters -- that changed everything for me by making me comfortable with the fact that I painted landscapes at a time when representational painting was a no-no. I also remember a single very hard critique with Professor Ron Binks, which gave me clarity of direction.

What are your strengths as a painter?

A strong, sure hand ... an attention to detail, which can be a weakness, but when kept in the right proportion, it works ...and a strong design sense, which helps me push the representation of specific subjects towards abstraction.

How has your painting developed? What drove your development as an artist?

I developed by just keeping at it, putting the time in. The work progresses on its own, fluidly, quietly, slowly. I have hit walls. I sought help at graduate school, and was fortunate enough to get exactly what I needed.

It's not simply a linear progression. Right now I'm doing daytime winter airport works that closely tie in to grisaille nature paintings of northern Ontario I painted in 1997-98 (grisaille is a style of painting all in shades of gray).

Is painting for you primarily emotional or intellectual?

Neither. It's just work. But work that can transcend to another state, a state of flow, just like when an athlete is in the zone, or a writer hits a point in writing a novel and has to type fast just to keep up with what's happening.

When I paint, it is a very concen-

trated act, which involves a directness combined with ease; the painting (which is done on top of a drawing and underpainting) is done in one sitting, no matter how long it takes.

How do you look at a painting? What do you feel?

I approach a painting as openly as possible. I let it do its thing, and try to figure out what it is that's happening.

We talk about art in order to better understand what's happening, yet the minute you start to talk about it you begin to misrepresent it – it's a visual language, not one of words.

What motivates you to paint?

Only me. I have a certain quiet, calm routine of coffee and reading, dog walking, sandwich-making, napping and then work. I try to protect myself from the outside world the days I paint, and try not to let anything in that could throw it all off. As Gustave Flaubert said, "Live your life like a bourgeois so your heart and mind can run wild."

Where have your paintings been shown? The Nicholas Metivier Gallery, where you had a recent show, is really quite prestigious, isn't it?

I was Nicholas Metivier Gallery's first solo exhibition in 2004 when they opened. The gallery was great then, and has only grown and gained momentum and breadth. I have shown in art fairs with them in New York, Miami, Madrid, Chicago and Toronto.

I've had solo exhibitions in Germany and the US, and in Canada (Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton and in Calgary with the Douglas Udell Gallery). I've also been in group exhibitions, including: Synthetic Psychosis at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto); Painting as Paradox at the Artists Space (New York); Glanz & Gloria at Renate Schroeder Gallery (Moenchengladbach, Germany); and many others.

What and who are your biggest influences in doing art?

My biggest influence is just the way I was raised – I was taught to draw, to appreciate art, design, nature. I have always done it so it is integral to my life –painting may not make me happy, but not painting makes me unhappy

Who do you admire among painters or visual artists?

The ones who are sincere and pursue what they need to with integrity: Vija Celmins was an early role model for that reason.

I like those that are great at what they do, especially Giorgio Morandi. Vermeer has always been a favourite...and Nancy Rubins, who makes sculptures out of salvaged industrial and consumer goods including mattresses, trailers, hot water heaters, airplanes and small appliances. I've been a fan of Chuck Close since I saw his photo realist self portrait at the Whitney on a class trip my first year at art school, and I'm an even bigger fan of his more recent gridded abstracted paintings and prints. I appreciate all of Arturo Herrera's work, especially his wall hangings, which are like sculpture, but are really drawings made out of felt.

The painters I am looking at change. John Singer Sargent's "Mrs. Henry White" paralyzed me the last time I was at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Fischli & Weiss video, "The Way of Things," at the Hirshorn Museum in Washington blew me away. I am still thinking about the Alex Katz collages I saw at the PS1 Contemporary Art Centre in New York in 1998; and the Rackstraw Downes painting I couldn't afford at an auction while in graduate school; and a stunningly simple wall sculpture of a single wire, shadow and graphite line by Richard Tuttle.

Does the world need painters? Why?

Need? I don't know. People keep

doing it, and have since early the cave paintings in France. Our lives are more meaningful through craft, arts, music, etc., and it's a way we can relate to and understand other cultures and other times.

Can you earn a living as a painter in Canada? If you want to be a painter, do you have to be frugal?

You shouldn't try to earn a living at it. Find another way to support yourself and keep the art separate from monetary pressures. That said, we (my husband's a writer) have been very frugal, but it hasn't been that big an effort. We do what we love doing, so it seems like somehow we got away with something.

Is there an "artistic temperament"?

There are many, I'm sure. But it's really about dedication, hard work, a thick skin, and a true desire to pursue your art. No one's asking you to do it, quite the opposite sometimes. What it comes down to is just you walking alone into a room night after night.

What kind of a footprint are you leaving on the world?

I try hard to lead a low impact life in terms of consumerism and the environment. I don't think about what I am leaving in any other way. I am happy when people buy the work and hang it on their walls, live with it, and hopefully develop a long-term relationship with it – that counts for something now.
