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AUGUST 20, 2008

HEAVY TRAFFIC

New work by Karen Woods

by [Christopher Schnoor](#)

It is not uncommon for painters to become fixated on a single subject, returning to it again and again from multiple angles or in different lights. Perhaps the most famous example is Paul Cezanne's countless studies in paint, watercolor and drawings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in Provence, France. Somehow, for the gifted, repetition does not diminish the impact of their art.

Karen Woods is in the grips of a similar passion. Since moving here from California in the mid 1990s, Woods has focused on capturing in oil paint the distinct mix of landscape and urbanization that is everyday Boise. Not the ubiquitous view down Capitol Boulevard to the Statehouse and Boise Range beyond, or other visual cliches constructing our "lifestyle" image. Rather than the picturesque, it is the gritty commercial blocks, unkempt empty lots and gray traffic intersections we drive past every day that catch her eye; those numbingly familiar aspects of our environment that often barely register.

For one who considers herself a landscape artist, Woods is drawn to the man-made. In recent years she has focused exclusively on the burgeoning Boise traffic scene, with its cars and trucks, signals and signs, concrete barriers and powerlines. "This is my landscape," she says. Woods drives around town, photographing potential subjects from inside her vehicle, which lends immediacy to her work and gives us the feel we are part of the action.

A dialogue between Woods' painting and photography implicit in her art has long been there and it is particularly apparent in her new work. Not only does the camera limit and shape our view (something she further manipulates by cropping the photo itself), but it assists the artist in enunciating the middle ground and more truthfully replicating the act of seeing. This window effect, so expertly rendered in paint, is one reason her art holds us as it does.

Woods' art emerged from a mixed pool of influences, some readily apparent and others not. As a 1987 graduate of the California School of Fine Art in Oakland, she is clearly influenced by Richard Diebenkorn, from whose example Woods learned to weave formal concerns, illusory pictorial space and an architectural sense of order with atmospheric color and light. Perhaps all those years living on the coast also accounts for her impressive ability to capture the local air and light in her scenes as if they were painted plein air on a beach.

In her early years as a painter, Woods was also under the spell of the abstract expressionists including Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Howard Hodgkin, as well as neo-expressionist painter Susan Rothenberg, as can be seen in the emotional weight Woods' canvases carry. Eastern landscape and sumi ink traditions are also evident in the design and graphic details of her work. In all, it is an interesting mix that should not be considered post-modern (an increasingly meaningless term). Indeed, the spirit of modernism, from Edward Hopper's melancholy city vignettes to Piet Mondrian's abstract reduction of nature, is distinctly present.

A small selection of new paintings by Woods is currently available for viewing at Stewart Gallery. I hesitate to call this a show, for at the time of my visit to Stewart's newly truncated space only a couple of the works were actually hanging, and were without the gallery's usual thoughtful presentation, lighting and wall labels. So it is very informal, which behooves interested parties to call ahead and announce their intentions.

Woods' most recent oils continue her preoccupation with traffic and related infrastructure that began with her "Connector" series of panel paintings in 2005. In those, sunlit vistas of new roadways at the I-84 interchange alternated with more restricted perspectives in which the landscape scene was reduced by darkly encroaching, somewhat menacing-looking overpasses and mammoth sky-level signs. Her Franz Kline-like verticals and horizontals of the towering concrete and metal structures gave the images a power out of proportion to their small scale.

At the Modern Hotel art event this past spring, Woods showed a subsequent body of "traffic" paintings, now on canvas, which were larger but narrowly vertical in format, as if to reflect in their tighter confines and melancholia of the worsening congestion. With their lengthy shadows, darker palette and glaring sun low on the horizon, they had an especially autumnal feel, a sense of creeping environmental transition.



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Reflect, 27" x 18", oil on canvas, 2008

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In the six new paintings (all larger still), Woods enlists the assistance of the weather as a means of heightening the window effect, or more precisely, windshield effect. By emphasizing the rain-splattered windshield and thus dramatically establishing a transparent yet barrier-like fore or middle ground, Woods accomplishes several things. Although four of the works are set in a time of year and time of day when the amount of light is minimal, natural light—refracted, dispersed or besmirched—is a primary subject here. We also have the sense of being sheltered behind glass from the descending, wet, urban night that soaks a work like *Tired* with an emotional heaviness (reminiscent of the setting of the movie *Blade Runner*). The disconnect inherent in the darkened, anonymous vehicles, each driver separated from the others in his or her own private polluter is also suggested here. This feeling of being segregated from the world we are navigating sets up, too, the premise of the artist as an outsider, the disinterested observer, which is a notion Woods feels a certain empathy with.

Not all of these new works are satisfactory. In the sunlit piece entitled *Only*, the colorful blurry orbs on the windshield have a distracting bubbly effect that takes the guts out of the piece. *Portrait*, with its side view of a stopped sedan, is just not all that interesting. *Crossing*, *Tired* and *End of the Day*, however, are well-done, with the latter two setting a bleak, noirish mood. Woods' abstract sensibility materializes in the way she uses light poles, wires, signal armatures and signs as formal elements to anchor the image. They recall Mondrian's early, non-objective "Pier and Ocean" studies in which he reduced nature's vastness and unity to a network of intersecting verticals and horizontals.

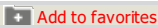
Wood's best painting in this group is *Reflect*, a vertical piece in which the rain on the windshield and hood is painted as crystalline beads of water rather than smudges, and as such capture and disperse the light as a prism would, intensifying the gray light. A row of receding telephone and light poles leads our eye down to distant flecks of red lights, like beads of color, echoing the rain. In terms of the light Woods renders, her expressionistic technique and the smell and feel of rain she evokes, *Reflect* is painting as a meteorological metaphor.

Stewart Gallery, 1110 W. Jefferson St., 208-433-0593 stewartgallery.com.

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