



SEE THE BEAUTY.

HONOUR THE
LAND.

Paintings on linen and works on duralar

Janet Read:
High Arctic Light

Toronto Heliconian Club

May 5 – June 1, 2022



THE HELICONIAN CLUB



Western arctic horizon, oil on linen, 20x60, 2022

Janet Read: High Arctic Light | essay by Margaret Rodgers

“the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas.”ⁱ

As the title implies, Read has created a series of oil paintings in response to her recent visit to the far north. Their generous dimensions express both the vastness of her subject and her experience as observer, participant, and communicator for this formidable and awe-inspiring landscape. While the titles *and the Wind Speaks*, *Vernacular of Light*, and *Tundra Light* provide direction for the subject matter, the colour and form deliver a deeper more meaningful impression which relates to the structure of the paintings themselves. In each piece there is a layering of pigment over pigment, with azure blue as a dominant colour, then hints of Read's former signature reds emerging in small subtle patches. One can suggest the depths of an iceberg in the layering process, and a knowledge of a world of rich colour below a frozen surface. *And the wind speaks* exhibits a sense of horizon beyond a churning ocean, while in *the vernacular of light 2 and 3* the entire picture plane becomes pure atmosphere, a frosted vision washed in a white fog with a distant light source trying to shine through.

In a departure from the large canvases, Read has also created drawings in oil and graphite on translucent Duralar. Titled *Light opens Over Water*, they have gestural immediacy in their depiction of churning ocean and cold light that provides a counterpoint to the major canvases. In describing non objective art the adjectives luminous, evanescent, atmospheric, speak to an abundance of hyperbole that dances around the subject of the paintings themselves. Mark Rothko famously called painting an anecdote of the spirit.ⁱⁱ

Which is true.

But there lives within this phrase the suggestion that the so called spirit does all of the work, with the artist merely a conduit.

So, easy.

Creating a painting that can achieve a level of transcendent beauty for the viewer is a highly developed and labour intensive process. Euphoric moments might arrive, but only after many (hours? days?) facing down the formal challenges that one confronts before or over the thing. Questions relating to the interaction of colour and form, internalized after decades of painting, are still challenges to be addressed. There exists an enormous physical component in the making of these works. Manipulating wet paint and thoughtfully assessing each move is the task and calling. Eventually there arrives something Read refers to as "the lock", a point at which the intuitive and responsive relationship between the painting and the artist becomes unified. This feedback between the art and the artist is a manifestation of a phenomenological principle that connects to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a favourite from Read's studies in philosophy. According to scholar Leila Wilson, his essay *Eye and Mind*

describes this vision as a movement that both extends the body through the act of looking and opens the body to the world through this extension. The body sees and is seen. It is within this merging between the perceiver and observer that distinctions break down between the subject and the object, the real and the imagined, and enclosure/encapsulation and space. The painter, with her endowment of a clairvoyant-like vision, unveils the object, while at the same time the object makes itself known to her. The invisible is made manifest through the painter's enactment of her vision and the object's revelation of itself to the painter. ⁱⁱⁱ

While Read's current project refers directly to the Arctic, she acknowledges ongoing experiences near and on water as integral to her oeuvre. Living several years in Port Hope, a Newfoundland residency in Pouch Cove, and Arctic travels have all found their way into her process.

The work also invites comparisons to that of mid-century modernists. While we can't "unknow" the abstract expression and colour field antecedents, the artist's twenty-first century existence has to be of considerable influence. Her work has been created within a period where environmental and societal anxieties are very different from the post war world of a booming America. Port Hope, her home for many years, has a contentious history of nuclear pollution. At present she lives a few steps from Toronto's Danforth Avenue, which saw a mass shooting in 2018. And the principal existential threat to the planet connects directly to global warming and the melting permafrost in the Arctic. High Arctic Light in some sense is a paean to a magnificent world that is rapidly transforming.

Regardless of present day issues and their relationship to contemporary art, modern art curator Michael Auping could have been writing about Read in his challenge to Clement Greenberg's assertion that flatness was the "salient aspect" of those enormous paintings by modernist giants Rothko, Pollock and Newman. Auping maintains that

"[o]ne can look deeply into these pictures, as though the artist were offering us a portal into an immense void. Conversely, one might also see these huge areas of color as projecting toward us, activating the space between our body and the painting, actually placing us in the void." ^{iv}

The paintings invite viewers to engage at both levels, an activated space between artwork and body, and a portal for connecting to the abstract and infinite that is implied in this High Arctic Light.



Arctic light opens over water #7, 17x23, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 21x 27) , 2022

Notes

ⁱ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1968) 196/149.

ⁱⁱ Mark Rothko, Miguel (López-Remiro 2006), *Writings on Art* (Yale UP, 2006) 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James E. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1964) 159-190 with annotation by Leila Wilson *Theories of Media*, Winter 2003, 1964a, L'Œil et l'esprit, Paris: Gallimard; "Eye and Mind", in Merleau-Ponty 2007.

^{iv} Michael Auping, "Beyond the Sublime", *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (Buffalo, NY: Abrams and Albright-Knox, 1987) 146.



The vernacular of light #2, oil on linen, 60x42, 2019

The vernacular is the commonplace, the ordinary, the light that gives us day, creating form and colour. Light powers the engine of life, growth and decay.



The vernacular of light #1, oil on linen, 60x42, 2019

Red breaks through ultramarine blue in this piece like the micro vegetation growing on tundra, thriving low to the ground with a subtle brilliant colour.



Tundra light, oil on linen, 60x42, 2019

We walked at Dundas Harbour on spongy tundra in a downfall of rainy snow, or snowy rain that created a veiled landscape. Only the land beneath your feet was truly visible



And the wind speaks, oil on linen, 60x42, 2019

Layers of colour articulate the surface of the painting as does the wind over snow and water. Movement, energy, colour, sizzling in the sky and ruffling the ocean.



Infinite arctic horizon #1, oil on linen, 36x36, 2022

Horizons are ephemeral in the high Arctic, vanishing into misty distances, multiplied by ice ridges, open water leads and reflections in sky and water. Where is near? What is far? The massive scale dwarfs the ship as mountains loom and massive glaciers are silent ghost rivers to the sea. We are suspended in horizontal bands of sea and sky.

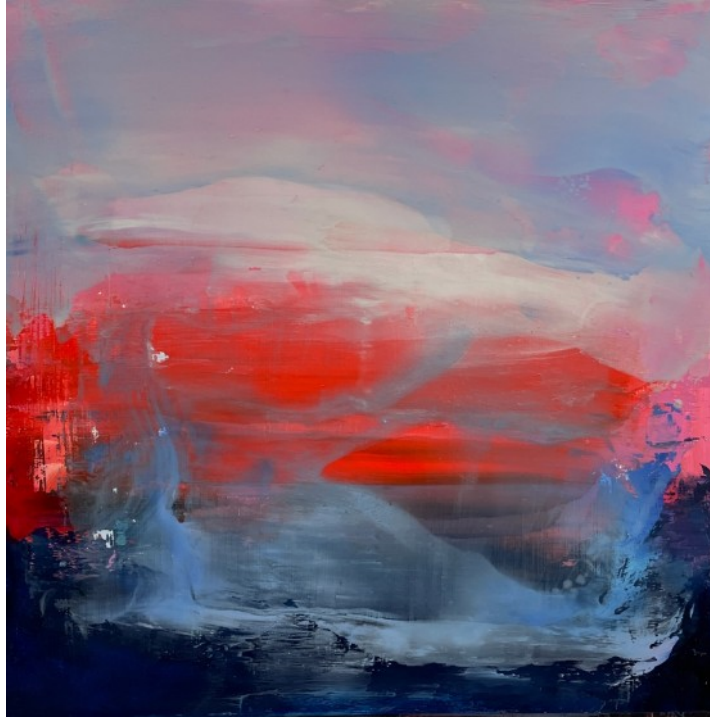


Infinite arctic horizon #2, 24x24, oil on birch panel, 2022

The world dissolves in paint, water, sky, reflection, and gesture layered with spatulas, palette knife, and brush.



Pink cloud, arctic sky, oil on birch panel, 24x24, 2022



Pale island, smoldering horizon, oil on birch panel, 18x18, 2022

This piece embodies "a summer midnight, the north/ Is red with the two lamps of dawn and sunset/" says the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown. Northern latitudes in summer swamp the mind with endless day, the sun briefly nodding to the horizon before it rises again.



Ocean fog, oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022



Quattrocento arctic sky, oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022

This is an immersion in the illusory architecture of the clouds. Shorelines, mountains, plains, great shafts of light fool the eye creating landscapes of insubstantial vapour. Let the wind lift these peaks and valleys of light. Fleeting peace in these troubled times.



The dawn arrives, oil on birch panel, 18x18, 2022

Mist rises from the land, air warms and all bursts into light and blueness.



Snow island, oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022



Holding light, breathing sky, 16x16, oil on birch panel, 2022



Pale island, smoldering horizon #2, 18x18, oil on birch panel, 2022



Arctic light opens over water #3, 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75), 2021

Rare fine weather and a sky washed in king's blue, turquoise and the merest hint of rose, an English watercolourist's palette transposed to a rock landscape on Devon Island. Turner comes to mind and the need to draw with sparing gesture and form.



Arctic light opens over water #4, 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75), 2021

This piece is dramatic, marked with fingers, palette knife and brush. Air swirls, the sea throws up spume, the atmosphere made tangible.



Arctic light opens over water #5, 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75), 2021



Arctic light opens over water #6, 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75), 2022



Arctic night #1, 40x30, acrylic and pouring medium on linen, 2021

Imagine the arctic night, the depth of sea, the secret layers of ice, the blind trust we place in our instruments to navigate treacherous waters.



Arctic night #2, 40x30, acrylic and pouring medium on linen, 2021

Drips create verticals in a horizontal composition and animate the painting with depth. The ice is creaking, floating islands, leads open and close, all is in motion.



Arctic seas, oil on linen, 26x26, 2020

Ice shifts, opens and shuts channels in the blink of an eye. Ice blink shows the shadow of open sea or land above the horizon, reflected in the clouds.



Breathe the bright air, the luminous light, 26x26, 2022

This recent oil on linen brings the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown's poem to mind. "Language unstable as sand, but poets/Strike on hard rock, carving/Rune and hieroglyph, to celebrate/ Breath's sweet brevity. /Swan-path, whale-acre./ Do you honour /The sea with good images?"



High arctic, ways of cloud and water, oil on canvas, 20x40, 2021

The sea surface reflects a myriad of colours, forms, ephemeral breaths of wind
skimming the rippled skin of water.



Artist Statement

I work from experience and memory. As Howard Hodgkin says, "in place of the beholder there is a rememberer." Memory and experience are embodied in lived landscapes. Recent travels in the high Arctic in 2018, inform my ongoing work. I visited Pond Inlet, Grise Fjord, areas of Devon, Philpott and Ellesmere Islands, and the northwest coast of Greenland over a month's time.

This rich experience nourished: sustaining my imagination over the past pandemic years. Memory is made tangible, realized, in the act of painting. The act of painting **is** both memory and experience.

My work stems from a deep connection to place and immersion in the natural world. Christian Bernard Singer, curator, says, "Janet Read's abstract works are like landscapes of consciousness that metaphorically interpret various states of being of the natural world." Paint is applied spontaneously in a process of improvisation that is refined over the period of the painting process. Oil, cold wax, multiple layers, scraping out and flinging paint mimic natural processes of wind, rain, cloud, and light. Spatulas are the primary tools. Gesture and mark making are integral in my work.

Susie Evyagotalak, a cultural leader, from the community of Kugluktuk, says "Our garden is the sea." Cultivation of the wild through Indigenous leadership can maintain a balance in this delicate environment. My work evokes this geography.

See the beauty.
Honour the land.

The high Arctic ignites my imagination with austerity, light, space, fragility, and beauty. My response: abstract visual exploration of light, earth and sea.

Bio

Janet Read is a painter, musician, and poet, who grew up near the shores of Lake Simcoe. The artist has sought the water's edge ever since. Ocean, lakes, and ephemeral light are constant themes in her work over the past twenty years. Read was born and educated in Toronto, and her roots go back to the Ottawa Valley Irish, Belfast and county Wexford in Ireland. Perhaps this explains a fondness for fiddle music, poetry and the sea.

Residencies in Newfoundland and Ireland, and travels in Norway, Iceland, and Scotland have allowed her continued access to the sea, leading to a passionate investigation of water as a metaphor for strength and fragility. Read holds an MA in the philosophy of art; focusing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur, and abstract painting.

Janet Read: High Arctic Light, works on linen and duralar

<i>And the wind speaks</i> , oil on linen, 60x42, 2019	6,300.00
<i>Arctic light opens over water #3</i> , 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x45.75)	3,500.00
<i>Arctic light opens over water #4</i> , 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x45.75)	3,500.00
<i>Arctic light opens over water #5</i> , 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75)	3,500.00
<i>Arctic light opens over water #6</i> , 28x40, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 35x 45.75)	3,500.00
<i>Arctic light opens over water #7</i> , 17x23, oil and graphite on duralar (framed, 21x 27)	1,550.00
<i>Arctic night #1</i> , 40x30, acrylic and pouring medium on linen, 2021	2,500.00
<i>Arctic night #2</i> , 40x30, acrylic and pouring medium on linen, 2021	2,500.00
<i>Arctic seas</i> , oil on linen, 26x26, 2020	1,800.00
<i>Breathe the bright air, the luminous light</i> , 26x26, 2022	1,800.00
<i>High arctic, ways of cloud and water #1</i> , oil on canvas, 20x40, 2021	2,000.00
<i>Holding light, breathing sky</i> , 16x16, 2022	650.00
<i>Infinite arctic horizon #1</i> , oil on linen, 36x36, 2022	3,240.00
<i>Infinite arctic horizon #2</i> , 24x24, oil on birch panel, 2022	1,500.00
<i>Ocean fog</i> , oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022	650.00
<i>Pale island, smoldering horizon</i> , oil on birch panel, 18x18, 2022	800.00
<i>Pale island, smoldering horizon, #2</i> , oil on birch panel, 18x18, 2022	800.00
<i>Pink cloud, arctic sky</i> , oil on birch panel, 24x24, 2022	1,500.00
<i>Quattrocento arctic sky</i> , oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022	650.00
<i>Snow island</i> , oil on birch panel, 16x16, 2022	650.00
<i>The dawn arrives</i> , oil on birch panel, 18x18, 2022	800.00
<i>The vernacular of light #1</i> oil on linen, 60x42, 2019	6,300.00
<i>The vernacular of light #2</i> , oil on linen, 60x42, 2019	6,300.00
<i>Tundra light</i> , oil on linen, 60x42, 2019	6,300.00
<i>Western arctic horizon</i> , oil on linen, 20x60, 2022	3,000.00



Ice #1, oil on duralar, 5x5, framed 250.00



Ice #4, oil on duralar, 5x5, framed 250.00



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Paintings, text: Janet Read
Photos: John A. Read