

CAROL RHODES, ACCLAIMED SCOTTISH PAINTER – OBITUARY

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Carol Rhodes

Carol Rhodes, the Scottish artist, who has died aged 59, was known for her restrained landscapes; working with oils on board, she painted scenes of a suburban nature, always from an elevated position, as if viewed from a low flying aeroplane.

Imagined vistas of roads, fields, industrial buildings and anonymous out-of-town warehouses were culled from the artist's collection of geography and geology textbooks, town planning manuals, photobooks and tourist brochures. "I like it bland," Carol Rhodes said of her source material.

Writing in 2007, the year of her major exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, the critic Tom Lubbock observed: "These paintings, with their markedly low-key palette, do not cry out to you across the room. They hold very little for the swiftly passing viewer. They wait for your close attention. When they get it, they unfold into an experience that's large in resonance and complexity."

Carol Rhodes produced no more than five paintings a year, first mapping out her compositions as drawings. If she felt some aspect of the work was not going as planned, or an error had been introduced, she was wont to scrape back the paint entirely and start again.



Escalator and buildings, by Carol Rhodes
Credit: Andrew Mummery and The Estate of Carol Rhodes

At times her washy brushwork veers towards abstraction, yet each work contains much hard-won detail. “Although the paintings are of things that are far away, each item I imagine very close up,” she explained. “Its smell and texture, whether grass for example is damp or dry, whether soil is sandy or clay, or how deep some water is.”

Carol Mary Rhodes was born on April 7 1959 in Edinburgh to William, a doctor, and Helen, née MacDonald, a former detective, both of whom had become Church of Scotland missionaries. The family travelled to India soon after, William first working as a surgeon at the mission hospital in Nagpur, before moving to teach theology at the University of Serampore.

It was in this West Bengal industrial town on the edge of the Ganges that Carol spent her childhood. As a young girl her friends were the cleaners, watchmen and caretakers of the college, her playground the spoiled landscape of an adjacent jute mill and water processing plant. In 1971 young Carol was sent to the Woodstock boarding school, a three-day journey away in Uttarakhand, high in the Himalayas.

The memories of the journey she took each term – the steam train’s slow ascension up the mountains – was crucial in the development of the perspective in her work. Views caught in motion became of particular interest: years later, while travelling by bus from Glasgow to Edinburgh, Carol Rhodes wrote to her gallerist: “I am in one of my paintings.”

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While staffed by Christian missionaries, Woodstock proved liberating: Carol and her friends smoked marijuana and embraced pacifism. Aged 14 she moved back to Britain, first to Sussex, and then Dumfriesshire, to obtain her O- and A-levels, moving between comprehensive schools. In Scotland, her father, now ordained, took on a parish.

While she found her return to Britain grim – at one point she suffered hypothermia – she remained, enrolling at the Glasgow School of Art in 1977, where she was taught by the Scottish realist painter Sandy Moffat, graduating in 1982.

Throughout the 1980s Carol Rhodes immersed herself in Left-wing activism, most notably the feminist movement. In a lesbian relationship, she went on the Reclaim the Night demonstrations and visited the Greenham Common women's peace camp; police were forced to handcuff her during a sit-in at the Faslane nuclear submarine base.



Surface Mine, by Carol Rhodes
Credit: Andrew Mummary and The Estate of Carol Rhodes

Alongside the writers Alasdair Gray and James Kelman and others, in 1987 she founded the Glasgow Free University, a discussion group that put on seminars and lectures on anarchism, feminism and “resistance” strategies, inviting the likes of artists John Latham and Stewart Home, as well as Noam Chomsky, to give lectures. Her work with the group overlapped with her time, from 1986 to 1988,

ALISON JACQUES

on the committee of Transmission, the artist-run gallery which was then in its infancy.

In 1992 Rhodes had a child with the artist Richard Walker, and motherhood, together with a teaching position at the School of Art, curtailed her activism. She became serious about painting and *Bay*, from 1994, was one of the first works she made with the elevated perspective. That year her work was included in *New Art* in Scotland, an influential group show organised at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow and the Aberdeen Art Gallery.

In 1995 she took a Scottish Arts Council residency in Slovenia, exhibiting in a show that toured on to Zagreb as the Croatian War was ending. Those European exhibitions would prove an exception, however. Carol Rhodes's slow pace of working meant that there were rarely enough paintings to lend to international shows. None the less, after she started to work with the Andrew Mummery Gallery in 1997, her work was collected by the Tate, Arts Council, British Council and the Center for British Art, Yale, among other public institutions.

That year, the artist Merlin James wrote on the artist's work for *Modern Painters* magazine and, in 2004, the two became partners. She had solo exhibitions at Tramway, Glasgow, in 2000, and the Scottish National Gallery in 2007. In 2012 Carol Rhodes and James opened an exhibition space on the ground floor of their home in Glasgow.

Carol Rhodes is survived by Merlin James and by her son Hamish.

Carol Rhodes, born April 7 1959, died December 4 2018