



Rosemary Kowalsky, *Invader*, Mixed media, 199" x 168", 1989.
Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank Collection.

ROSEMARY KOWALSKY

Rosemary Kowalsky was born in St. James, Manitoba in 1920. In 1975 she received her BFA (Honours) from the School of Art, University of Manitoba. Over the 16 years between 1975 and 1991, she took part in over 20 solo and 30 group exhibitions in Manitoba and other provinces. Her works can be found in public, corporate, and private collections throughout Manitoba, including the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank, Canada Council Art Bank, Manitoba Hydro, University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, Royal Bank of Canada, Air Canada, and many others. Kowalsky passed away at age 86 on October 16, 2006.



ENDANGERED SPECIES
ROSEMARY KOWALSKY

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA
SEPTEMBER 4 – OCTOBER 25, 2014

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2
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Endangered Species brings together works by prolific Manitoba artist Rosemary Kowalsky (1920 – 2006) from diverse public and corporate collections. Most active in the 1980s and 90s, Kowalsky inscribed a deep memory of violence into her practice, suggesting that it was a reflection of her personal experience during World War II. In vivid drawing, paintings and installation, she strove to create a language that spoke to the conditions of fragility and trauma through the use of repeated images of flowers, garden tools, and insects. Kowalsky created an iconography for these concepts that can be located within the familiar realm associated with women’s work, while stating that dark histories are often located in the most innocuous spaces.

The name of Kowalsky’s last major exhibition in 1998 at Main/Access Gallery was *Life and Death are One*. The curatorial essay by Carol Fournier Dicks conveys Kowalsky’s passion for gardens, flowers, and beautiful living things caught up within the constant intertwining and interdependence of life and death. These ideas are also central to *Endangered Species*, which presents an overview of Kowalsky’s practice through four bodies of work: *Charleswood* series; large visceral paintings and drawings of flowers and tools inspired by Charles Baudelaire’s poetry in his 1857 book *Fleurs du Mal*; the tools that gradually overtook them; and the series of insects drawn onto recycled tent fabric in *New Endangered Species*. Like a thread connecting the diverse subjects of her work, conflicts play out between species in the garden, the artist’s studio, and through attempts to delineate the human and the natural domains.

Kowalsky’s subjects and materials were driven by intuition, often taking on a life of their own. As a result, there is a constant flow between control and deliberate chance in the work. Never precious, instead, they confront her subject matter head-on without hesitation. Technically, intuitive gestures take the form of bits of cardboard in *Charleswood/The Studio* (1982), gold powder in *Road to a Blue Madonna* (1983), and bold use of oil stick, metallic gel, and scraps of canvas in the large flower and tool paintings.

Charleswood was the second major series Kowalsky exhibited, and the first time she began to boldly experiment with scale and materials. This series followed paintings, smaller drawings, and prints exhibited under the title *In the Smokehouse*, which depicted drying fish carcasses reminiscent of human bodies, a direct reference to the horrors of war. Looking both at the early drawings and prints, and their evolution into *Charleswood* suggests an intertwining of memory, ecology, and a concern for the fragility of the human condition in the face of violence. However, this fragility is not a delicate almost-breakage, but is always at the brink of catharsis. Kowalsky approached these concerns through different subject matter, beginning with architectural structures. However, the tension between interior and exterior spaces, whether architectural or psychic, continued to be at the centre of her later bodies of work.

The architecture in *Charleswood/The Studio* is subsumed by the visceral application of dark red paint, while in *Road to a Blue Madonna* a wall breaks the expected horizon line by countering

the vanishing point of a tunnel. Her application of gold paint and gel medium on top of collaged pieces of canvas contrasts with the thin washes of blue on the enormous canvas. The underlying elements of architecture, both interior and exterior, are present in the passages: doors, windows, tunnels. The viewer’s attempt to comprehend the spaces in Kowalsky’s paintings is always met with resistance: the studio is askew, open into the flat painted surface the colour of clotted blood; the road does not lead through the tunnel into vanishing perspective, but folds outwards into the gallery space. Such moments of conflict declare the landscapes and their architectural elements as internal and psychologically charged, alluding to “fragments of landscape memories which lie just beyond the grasp of the conscious mind to become mythical elements of long departed experiences.”¹

Kowalsky’s interest in the subconscious, and especially its association with sexuality and power, grew into a series of drawings and paintings focused on her garden. She became attracted to the simple shapes of garden tools contrasted against delicate flowers while reading Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*. Baudelaire’s poems meander through themes of modernity, sexuality, and darkness interspersed with flashes of beauty found in the modern city. The themes resonated with Kowalsky’s interest in the negotiation between power and fragility, inspiring her to create a new body of work. Like the architecture in *Charleswood*, Kowalsky’s flowers are neither dainty nor clearly botanical, but subversively large and openly sexual. She acknowledged that, as a woman, painting flowers was a brave act ripe with stereotypes of Sunday painters and proud hobby gardeners. Instead of avoiding the subject matter, however, she used her paintings to challenge such expectations through works that are visceral, almost abject, and never tame. Instead, their fragility is present in lushly layered colours and the inherent vulnerability that comes with exposing the body.

In smaller drawings, such as *Scissors and Flower* (1984-1985), scissor blades cut across the delicate tendons of a flower, as if severing them in a violent act. Gradually, the tool images took over, towering on enormous canvases. In the reviews of the work written at the time, the tool paintings were interpreted as depictions of rape and female vulnerability, as Kowalsky often encountered sex workers around her studio in the Winnipeg Exchange District. However, she always eschewed these explanations as too direct, preferring for her work to be interpreted as metaphors for the broader threats of extinction and constant negotiations of power.²

The garden tools grew larger than life, violent, otherworldly, and yet rendered useless through representation. Kowalsky’s cryptic opening statement to the exhibition *Tools at Ace Art Gallery* in 1985 was “Art is not as useful as a hammer is useful,” accompanied by an enormous *papier maché* sculpture of a hammer. The power (and powerlessness) of representation hovers over the struggle and weaving of dichotomies that Sigrid Dahle describes as central to Kowalsky’s work in *Multiplicity of Voices: Work by Manitoba Women Artists* between “nature and technology, growth and destruction, female and male, power and vulnerability.”³

In a document titled “Outline of Artistic Work in the Past Eighteen Months” framing a new body of work titled *New Endangered Species*, Kowalsky recalls purchasing several boat tarpaulins from a garage sale and then misplacing them in a move. When she found them a year later, the stained surfaces suggested “empathic” images: they reminded her of the sound of insects beating against tent walls, while their earthy colours evoked cave paintings. This associative process led to a purchase of a Girl Guide tent and inserting paper works into the screen windows. The insects were “a natural growth of ideas from the flower/tool images. The fear of insects invading, dominating, taking over ‘our’ space....As an artist, I am defining my culture and questioning its ethics - its thrust for extinction.” The tents were a source of memories, both of being a Girl Scout and of going camping later as an adult. The sheltering canvas of the tent is meant to keep away insects, but it barely succeeds against the towering painting of the moth on the other side of a mesh window in *Invader*. The permeable boundaries of the tent, meant to keep its human inhabitants safe from nature, challenge the notion that spaces can be contained at all.

A very specific memory at the centre of *New Endangered Species* is a grasshopper invasion that Kowalsky experienced as a child growing up during the Great Depression. She recognized species in conflict, as hunger was threatening her family with extinction while the grasshoppers took over the family’s space and challenged the human claim to power over nature. She recalls this terrifying, almost Biblical, episode of being caught in a swarm of grasshoppers that overtook the family’s food, clothing, and hair, covering everything around them with dark spit. Made gargantuan in Kowalsky’s drawings, the insects command respect, conveying the overwhelming power and otherworldly terror that she felt as a child.

While Kowalsky’s work focuses on objects familiar to her and located within her surroundings, the objects are altered and internalized to confront and undo expectations imposed on them. Through its simultaneous address of autobiographical and universal concerns, it challenges conceptions of what shape women’s artwork takes. Kowalsky presents the everyday as a place in which complex narratives play out across species. Her paintings and drawings are a reminder that our environment is a network of constant negotiations of power: between humans and animals; cultivation and control; protection and exposure; vulnerability and strength. These are not quaint landscapes, pretty flowers, colourful butterflies, and tools used to gently manage them, but a universe that is always a touch off kilter. In Kowalsky’s version of the world there are no right angles; everything is askew and carried by a current of undeniable darkness.

- Natalia Lebedinskaia,
Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery
of Southwestern Manitoba
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978-1-927076-13-2
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LIST OF WORKS
ROSEMARY KOWALSKY
Road to a Blue Madonna, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 1983, 60” x 119”, Collection of Manitoba Hydro.
Charleswood/The Studio, Acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 1982, 62.2” x 95.1”, Collection of the Buhler gallery, gift of Barry Kowalsky.
Scissors and Flower, Coloured pencil and oil stick on paper, 1984-85, 41.5” x 29.5”, Collection of the Gallery 1Co3, University of Winnipeg. Gift of the Estate of Rosemary and Cliff Kowalsky.
Fleur du Mal, Mixed media on canvas, 1985-1988, 76.5” x 50”, Collection of the Gallery 1Co3, University of Winnipeg. Gift of the Estate of Rosemary and Cliff Kowalsky.
Fork, Acrylic on canvas, 1986, 66” x 78”, Manitoba Ars Council Art Bank Collection, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.
Hammer, Mixed media on canvas, 1987, 66”x 78” inches, Collection of St.John’s College, University of Manitoba.
Scissors, Mixed media on canvas, 1987, 66” x 78” inches, Collection of the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba.
David, Graphite and oil stick on paper, 1989, 33.5” x 48.25”, Collection of the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba.
Consider the Lily II, Oil stick on Somerset paper, 1990, 44” x 26”, Collection of the Buhler gallery, gift of Barry Kowalsky.
Invader, Mixed media, 1990, 82.6” x 50.7”, Manitoba Ars Council Art Bank Collection, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.
Untitled Lily I, Acrylic on canvas, 1990, 68.5”x60”, Collection of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.
Untitled Lily II, Acrylic on canvas, 1990, 68.5”x60”, Collection of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

¹ Dale Amundson, *Rosemary Kowalsky’s Recent Paintings*, curatorial essay, Gallery 1.1.1., University of Manitoba, 23 Aug. - 10 Sept. 1982, Gallery 1.1.1. (Winnipeg).

² Arthur Adamson, *Border Crossings*, 1986, Volume 5, number 2, 8-9

³ Sigrid Dahle, *Multiplicity of Voices: Work by Manitoba Women Artists* Gallery 111, The University of Manitoba p. 32.

