



Karen Woods: "Inside Looking Out" at Stewart Gallery

by christopher schnoor

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Island

2009

Karen Woods

Oil on linen

11" x 5"

Photo: courtesy Stewart Gallery

When Karen Woods moved from California to Boise fifteen years ago she brought with her an art background that included a BFA from the California College of the Arts, studies in Florence, Italy, an informed appreciation of Eastern landscape and sumi ink traditions, and a knack for turning her camera into a handmaiden of her painting. In the ensuing years, she has brought these influences to bear in a succession of thematically related oils that capture the overlooked aspects of the Boise urban landscape. Eschewing the picturesque for the pedestrian, Woods focuses on provocatively cropped views of empty lots, power lines, highway interchanges, forlorn arboreal inhabitants of this "City of Trees," and more recently, the ambient mundanities of traffic intersections and street scenes photographed from inside her pickup. An expert at rendering natural and seasonal light, Woods has increasingly given prominence of place to the elements, with the weather assuming a role as subject matter in its own right.

"Inside Looking Out" is an appropriately succinct title for this exhibition of 22 new paintings. Woods continues her hallmark device of situating us in the front seat, and implicitly in the composition, so that her streetscapes viewed through the windshield have a casual immediacy that harks back to those post-impressionist studio window views Bonnard and others favored. In Woods' traffic subjects this compositional device has tended to isolate us in a private vehicular space while simultaneously negotiating the busy outside world. This sense of enclosure is enhanced in her new *Beadwork* series that bring the rivulets and beads of rain on the glass into sharp focus, distorting and obscuring the exterior view, and reinforcing the sense of intimate interior space. Her focus also allows Woods to explore in paint how these watery blemishes capture and refract the subdued light, and spread, intensify and mutate color, a project she pursues with relish.

The other works on view were predominantly melancholy, with leaden skies, shrouds of fog, or wet descending nights lending a bleak, sometimes noir-ish mood to her canvases. Two vertically slender images, *Going Home, January*, and *Island* captured the quiet poetry of chill air enveloping and saturating lonely streets. Wood's art is essentially autobiographical, capturing in a personal way her daily interactions with the natural and man-made world.