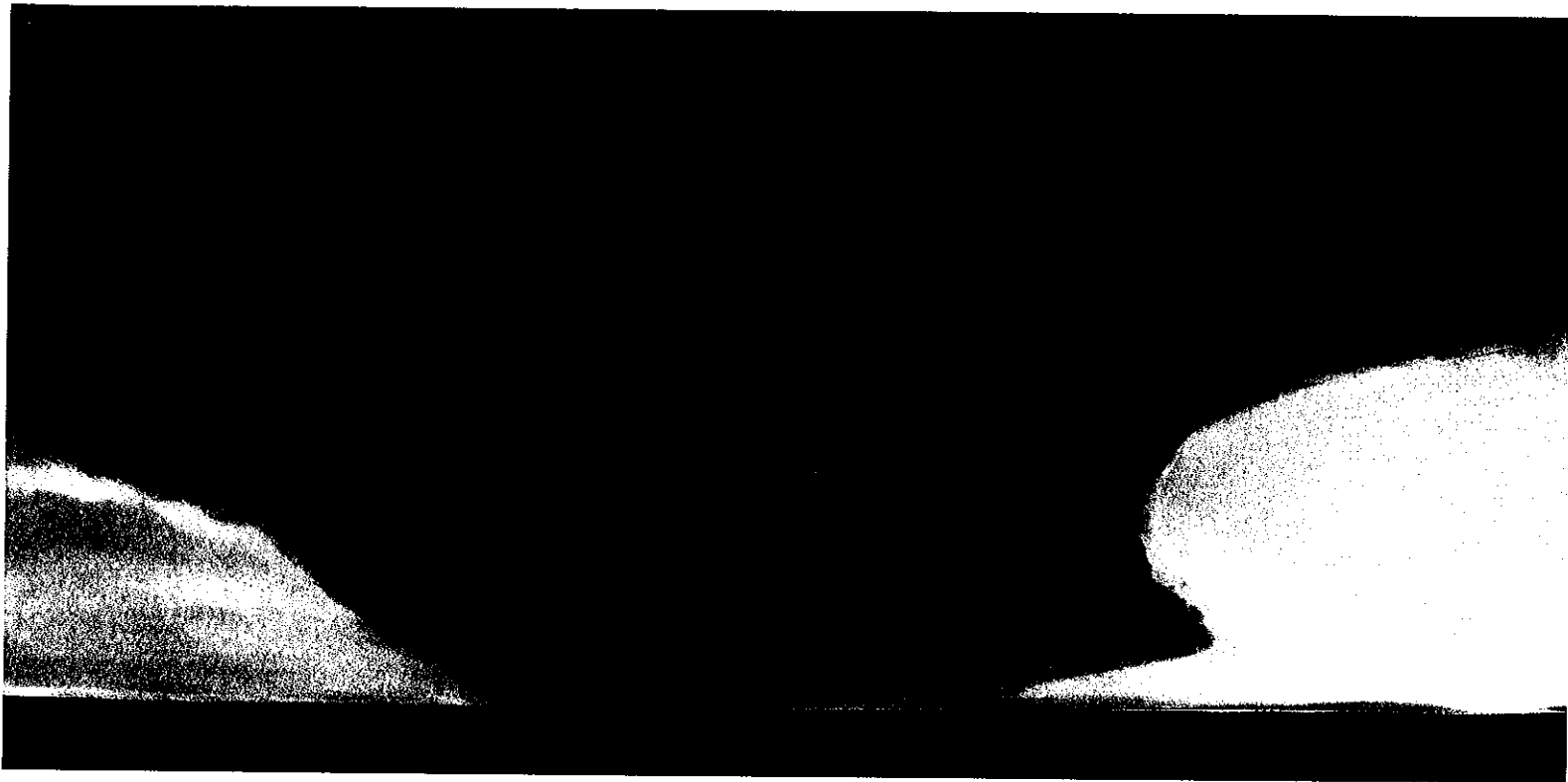


MARIAN WIHAK



BOUNDLESS: SUBLIME MAELSTROM

I find myself standing in the midst of an eternity, a vast and inexhaustable present. The whole world rests within itself - the trees at the field's edge, the hum of crickets in the grass, cirroocumulous clouds rippling like waves across the sky, from horizon to horizon . . . my body is at home, in the open present. . . David Abram

Marian Wihak

Boundless: Sublime Maelstrom

With her gaze turned upward so that the horizon barely limns the bottom of the canvas. Marian Wihak's almost monochromatic paintings of vast luminous skies interrupted by pendant, ominous clouds sit somewhere between the factual and the abstract. Although sourced from the flat and ostensibly empty southern Saskatchewan prairie, her elusive ethereal images are more often full than empty: here great lyrical swaths of modulated greys veiled by subtle fields of colour, from dark sensuous greens to blues, reminds us not only of the beauty of nature but of its endless turning and churning - endless becoming.

Recalling in some ways the paintings of modernist American artists Mark Rothko who deployed lyrical abstraction in his own dark and moody work of the 1950's, these images hint at the intangible, at a metaphysic - a world view that seeks knowledge beyond the physicality of the sensory world. Here we viewers are (like Wihak herself) drawn into the scenic events occurring in the landscapes before our eyes, understanding them as threshold spaces that evoke the immensity and power of nature. On first reading, we would also be right in positioning these works alongside those of the late 18thc German Romantic painters who encoded a melancholy nature as a metaphor and metonym for the mysteries and power - a dynamic both rhythmic and mythic - here represented by the forces of light and dark. But is this dramatic contrast one that points to separation or unity?

The titles Wihak gives her paintings obliquely refer to the wonders, mysteries, charms and ambiguities of nature and human existence as configured in the cosmology of the ancient Greeks. In their mythological tales, the gods gave order to chaos by creating earth and sky from the tumultuous maelstrom of universal cosmic energy. In these paintings of looming clouds in vast vast skies, we sense nature in its constant reshaping and remaking in a rebalancing of itself - giving momentary shape and order to the ephemeral energies and forces active within it. Here is earth and sky, and light alongside its fellow traveller darkness, endlessly waxing and waning. From those stories and of course from these images as well, we understand the unfixed-ness of things that nature in its flux and flow is not finite, but rather an outcome of unbounded universal potential.

Of course these notions of energies, of universals and of infinites bedevil our corporeal existence: how do our embodied human forms not only sense and even understand boundless time and space but reflect them as well? How do we as viewers repeat Wihak's response to these events and move from spectacle into sensation - and then from sensation into apprehension? As viewers we become spectators here gazing at the screen/canvas on which Wihak has projected her own remembered and felt experience of being in this place, gazing at empty/full skies: like her, we become witness to the frightening but simultaneously reassuring spectacle of nature operating around us - of which we are a part.

→ I return to the horizon line in these images - a familiar element in landscape painting which describes the division between earth and sky, between the finite and the infinite. The only fixed structural element in these works, it reminds us not only that we are constantly surrounded by the infinite circle it creates but that we have physical location in physical space, whether that is in the landscape itself or in the gallery while viewing these images of landscapes. Our very awareness of the depicted horizon and through that of being located in the space of the gallery is prompted by vision - but it progresses then toward an awareness or consciousness of the processes of perception itself: of how, through the senses, intuition and even body we engage other forms of knowing and understanding. Wihak's images then not only point beyond themselves to abstract time and space but point us toward an understanding of "being present" in the world. For German philosopher Edmund Husserl suggests, this kind of consciousness lead to an apprehension of the rhythms and modes of the appearance of the world.

Clouds momentarily visible giving form to formlessness, then rising and falling, expanding and contracting: these are not static forms but ones undergoing constant metamorphosis - as we are human beings, and the universe itself. Wihak refers to the Greek work *cha* relative to this work, which identifies a state of "holding and release" - of being aware of and even present in boundless space but at the same time as being expansively released from and into it. French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, speaks to this when he writes:

"As I contemplate the blue of the sky . . . I abandon myself to it . . . I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified and as it begins to exist itself, my consciousness is saturated with the limitless blue. . ." ²

→ Unbounded physically and temporally, this is pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic mind - one that simultaneously knows and not knows.

In the end, Wihak ponders being and knowing here through these paintings, her images reflecting an ontological view that understands the world to be suffused with potentiality: they begin in and return us to the "here and now."

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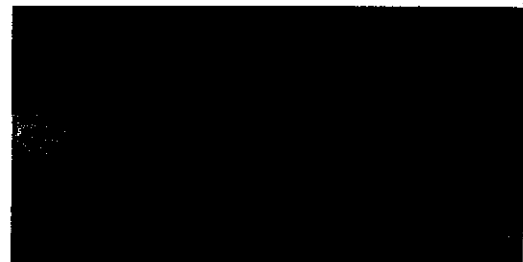
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Orphic study, 30" x 40", 2009
Arcus, 48" x 96", 2009

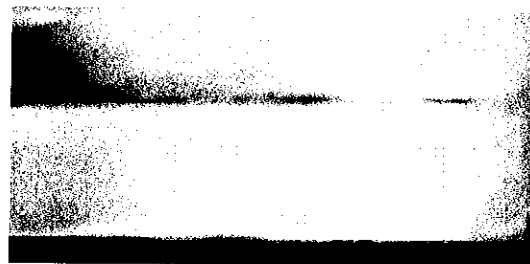




Boundless: the view from here



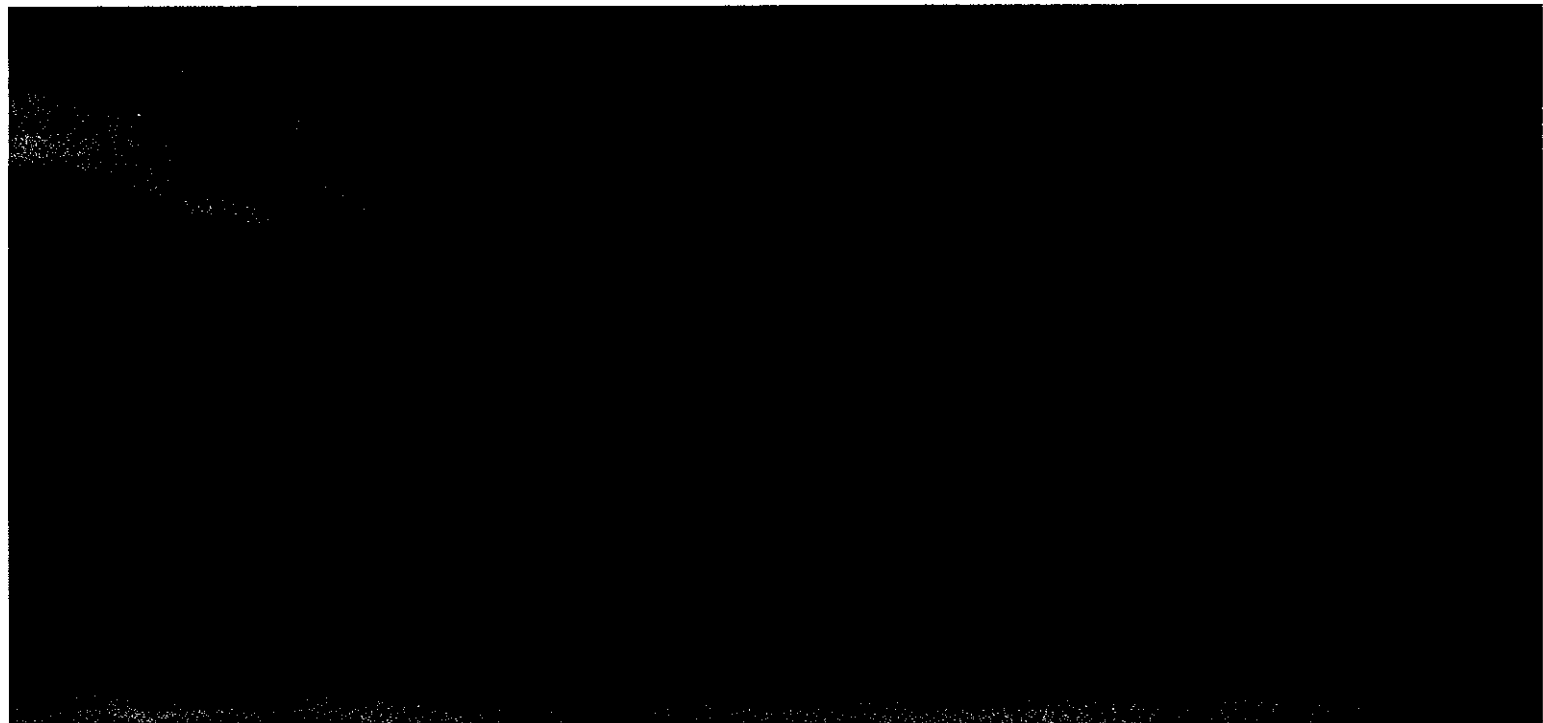
Marian's work is clearly of prairie skies and landscapes. The skies always dominate the land and by extension the lives. As the scale of the paintings increases so does their aggression and vigour. I like them best when they become intimidating.



of all things living on that land. Weather events are breathtaking, glorious, threatening, frightening and above all visible.
y. Frank Nulf.

Boundless: the view from here, 36" x 32", oil on canvas, 2007







BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Regina, Saskatchewan, Marian Wihak lives and works in Toronto, Ontario. Originally trained as a theatre designer, she has studied at the University of Regina, Dalhousie University in Halifax, the Banff Centre, The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, The Ontario College of Art and Design and Studio Arts Centre International in Florence, Italy.

Marian was a recipient of a 2008 Canada Council Grant for Research and Creation. She was a Central Canadian Finalist in the 2001 RBC New Canadian Painting Competition and is featured in the recent publication celebrating the Competition's 10th Anniversary.

In December 2009, Wihak's solo show, *Boundless: Sublime Maelstrom* was held at the Art Gallery of Regina. Her other recent solo shows include *Liminal Places* at the Oeno Gallery in Trenton, Ontario and *Boundless: The View From Here* at the Rotunda Gallery in Kitchener-Waterloo. She has also shown extensively in group shows including *A Force of Nature* at Rouge Concept Gallery (Toronto); *Homage*, at Cube Gallery (Ottawa); *City at Night: A Tribute to Brian Kipping* at the Bau-Xi Gallery (Toronto). Her work is in many corporate and private collections across North America including those of the Ontario Power Authority, Salman Partners in both Calgary and Toronto, Danpack Industries in Kansas City, Kansas USA; and Gary and Michelle Roberts.

For many years an accomplished multi-disciplinary artist, Wihak is also a theatre, film and television production designer whose work has received numerous nominations and awards, including a Gemini nomination for Gordan Pinsent's *Heyday*; a Dora Mavor Moore nomination for her design for *The Leisure Society* at Toronto's Factory Theatre; and the Gemini Award for Best Production Design for both *September Songs: the Music of Kurt Weil* produced by Rhombus Media, and *Pit Pony*, directed by Eric Till.

In 2010 she will be creating an immersive installation based on her Boundless series when she designs *Harp of God* with Director Richard Rose for Toronto's Tarragon Theatre and The Segal Theatre in Montreal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The artist gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council Exhibition Assistance for *Boundless: Sublime Maelstrom* held at the Art Gallery of Regina Dec 9/09-Jan. 23/10



The artist thanks Karen Schoonover and the Art Gallery of Regina for initiating the exhibition *Boundless: Sublime Maelstrom*.



SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING

for the assistance in the publication of this catalogue:

Anonymous
Dawn and Bill Elliott
Dr. Doug Thomas
Flaman AgriVentures
Fred and Allie Wihak
Ken Gass
Minds Eye Entertainment
Shelley Silverman



Delphos, 30" x 40", oil on canvas, 2009

Boundless: Sublime Maelstrom is the second phase of the Boundless body of work in which I am rendering large-scale oil paintings that reference cloud masses, dramatic weather systems, and limitless geographical horizons as I've witnessed in Southern Saskatchewan and Alberta. The experience of being within that infinite space tethers and perhaps diminishes us, yet also exhilarates and fulfils us by igniting the imaginative leap.

The paintings in this series are expansive, stylized representations that are as much metaphors for spiritual longing as they are portraits of a magnificent geography and I use them as icons to convey ideas about boundlessness. The concept of "Boundless" is a sublime one that has been universal since the beginning of conscious thinking; The word *Chaos* has been used to describe this boundless Space, this Void, this Deep and draws its twofold meaning from the ancient Greek work "cha" - holding and releasing. In this way, I embrace more affirmative definitions of both maelstrom and chaos, as states of being that are rife with change, upset and yet also, potential.

In 2008 I was awarded a Canada Council Grant to continue exploring the Boundless series, and spent that summer taking photographs from my car as I travelled across the southern band of Alberta and Saskatchewan. It was a summer marked by awesome storms and dramatic meteorological activity, and I became all too aware of how, with each passing season these powerful forces of nature are multiplying in tandem with our compromised environment. The resulting spectacle of the skies offers a palpable signifier of the seismic shift in our actual physical place in this universe, inextricably linking the part we play now, and with all and future ways.

Marian Wihak, 2009