

TO LOOK DOWN AND SEE THE SKY

The sky reflected in still water is a visual paradox, an incident of coolly remote atmosphere at our feet, as if whatever expanse of concrete, or asphalt, or earth on which we walk has been revealed to be a wafer thin veneer over infinite distance beneath. The skies in painted puddles fix this paradoxical impression in place, and the European history of this reiterative trope dates back at least to the 17th century Dutch masters. Ruisdael and Vermeer are especially known for scenes of forest or village shoreline reflected in standing water. The 19th century German Romanticists, particularly Casper David Friedrich, enriched the representation of reflection by attaching it to the ideological inscription of a new natural symbolism, depicted in opposition to the traditional religious and political values of the day which the Romanticists considered to be exhausted. In Friedrich's *The Great Reserve*, 1831-32, a distant boatman is painted as if guiding his small craft across a sliver of sky; an image of exploring a new realm of signification manifested by nature itself.

If the grandeur of nature, or *The Natural*, has been all too easily applied to past pictures of sky reflected in water, this is certainly not the case with Shona Macdonald's new series of paintings and drawings. Many among the works on view in "Ground Covering," include some upward reflection of sky and nearby things in puddles or stagnant sloughs. The effect, though, is anything but romantic. The casein, acrylic, and oil on canvas *Two Cars*, 2015, offers us an expanse of cloudy sky whose topmost edge—just below the actual edge of the canvas—includes the roofs of those eponymous vehicles, confirming that we're really looking down and across a substantial roadway puddle. The tires of two vehicles are seen in the strip of gray road surface, but their tops are cropped by the picture's edge. The reflected roof on the left must belong to the tires above it, but the vehicle on the right is too far away to be the source of that right-hand reflection. There must be a third vehicle, with open driver side door, just beyond what Macdonald is permitting us to see. In *Sky on Ground #7*, 2015, the irregularly shaped puddle occupying most of the picture plane includes a "neck" in which the green crown of a tree can be seen. The other reflected object, though, is a corner of a fence row, surmounted by a knob that suggests a bedpost as much as a post and rail. In both pictures the water is depicted with uncanny stillness. Macdonald's subtly modulated brushwork marks the phenomenological convergence of viscosity and lassitude, of a visual lull standing in for taciturn narrative.

Even in the scenes without standing water we encounter instead wrapped, shrouded, and cloaked forms in arrangements that suggest, but do not confirm, that we are looking at gardening or horticultural activities. These works are disquieting and shadowy, for all the crispness with which the artist has rendered the human structures seen there. Macdonald has spoken eloquently to the sense of "dislocation" haunting her recent work. The admixtures of her pigments and the looking glass duplicity of her compositions bring to our awareness the artist's further subject of emotional unconnectedness. The most quotidian stuff or settings here are transmogrified in pictures where gravity itself is upended and the time and space between things is made to be as concrete as the objects themselves.

-Buzz Spector



Ground Covering #22 | 2015
silvepoint on ground on paper | 6 3/4 " x 8"