



Mary Abma:
Peregrinatio



recent works by Mary Abma

Peregrinatio

February 1 to March 1, 2008

Gallery Lambton

ISBN 1-896636-13-6

Typesetting and Design: Gallery Lambton

Printing: Kwik Kopy Print Centre

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Gallery Lambton

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Gallery Hours: Monday to Saturday 10 am to 5:30 pm



Gallery Lambton is funded by the
County of Lambton, the Ontario Arts Council,
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Mary Abma: Artist's Statement

*We shall not cease from exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

- T.S. Eliot

I grew up in a house that had a whole bookcase dedicated to rocks, shells, and fossils. My parents had, over the years, collected many treasures from the natural world. There was the piece of amethyst that my great-grandfather had found on his property. There was the large quartz prism, a chambered nautilus shell, a geode, and many other fascinating objects that had come from the earth. I have fond memories of walking with my Dad along the beach, looking down at the stones. He showed me how to identify which rocks might be geodes, which ones were Petoskey stones, and which ones contained fossils.

My interest in these items continued into my adulthood. I have spent many hours walking on the quarry stone along the Bright's Grove shoreline, my eyes cast down on the millions of fossils preserved there. The collection at "Stones 'n Bones", in Sarnia, became a favourite of mine and I knew that I had to do a series of artwork that was inspired by fossils, petrified wood, and other natural formations. The objects in the collection at "Stones 'n Bones" and the fossils along the shoreline became the inspiration for *Peregrinatio*.

It is part of the human condition to contemplate the nature of life. We look around us and see a physical world. The earth herself holds a narrative, a story that reaches from a distant past to an unknown future. We are part of that story. Recognizing that our physical existence is temporary, we can project that our corporeal selves and the material aspects of our society will ultimately become part of the fossil record of the future. From its beginnings, humanity has desired to reach beyond our earth-bound existence to seek assurances of immortality and to attempt to leave a legacy of our own transcendence as proof of our being and as a bridge to the future.

The artwork for this exhibition will reference earth's fossil record: organic fossils, geodes, geological formations, and petrified wood. Through my works, these objects are used symbolically to become metaphors for memory, transformation, legacy, and transcendence. My paintings lead the viewer to enter a contemplation of a cycle that includes life, death, fossilization, and transformation. The process of fossilization itself is a tangible link between the past and the future. And so it stands as a powerful symbol for humanity and for transformation that reaches beyond our current experience.

Peregrinatio is an ancient word that in its broadest sense means, "pilgrimage". However, the term is also used metaphorically to describe an inner, spiritual journey or quest. By acknowledging that we have a deep connection with our natural world, and with one another, we catch glimpses of the intangible. And so we begin our quest to see what lies beyond our physical existence, our own memories and our experiences. In this exhibition, images of the journey or quest coexist with symbols of the earth's fossil record to compel the viewer to consider his or her own *peregrinatio*. ●



Chambers, 2007
gouache, gesso, and photographic collage on canvas



Threshold, 2007
gouache on canvas

Beyond the Obvious: The Language of Art and Nature

Since my first visit to Mary Abma's studio six months ago, I have been thinking about her current work as landscape. It wasn't until I sat down to write this catalogue essay that I realized there was no immediately obvious rationale for this framework. She has made no attempt to accurately represent the vastness of the sky or the ruggedness of the rocks, trees or water. There is no exploration of the energy or calm of the atmosphere or the changing kaleidoscopic qualities of light. Rather, it is the historical trappings of landscape painting as a place of mediation between the mortality of man and the eternity of God that connects Abma's work to the tradition of landscape painting.

Abma, like many regional artists, is grappling with contemporary artistic values and issues while working out of a contemporary regional aesthetic: an aesthetic that is simultaneously grounded in geographical place and in global artistic trends. In *Peregrinatio*, Abma is inspired by the shores of her home on Lake Huron and considers landscape as meditation. Like the name suggests her work is reflective of the universal inward journey that is prompted by the desire to understand one's place in the world and in the cosmos. Working with contemporary questions of identity, memory, morality and mortality, Abma offers the viewer an opportunity to consider one's self in relation to place through a shared contemplation of the temporality of the cycle of life.

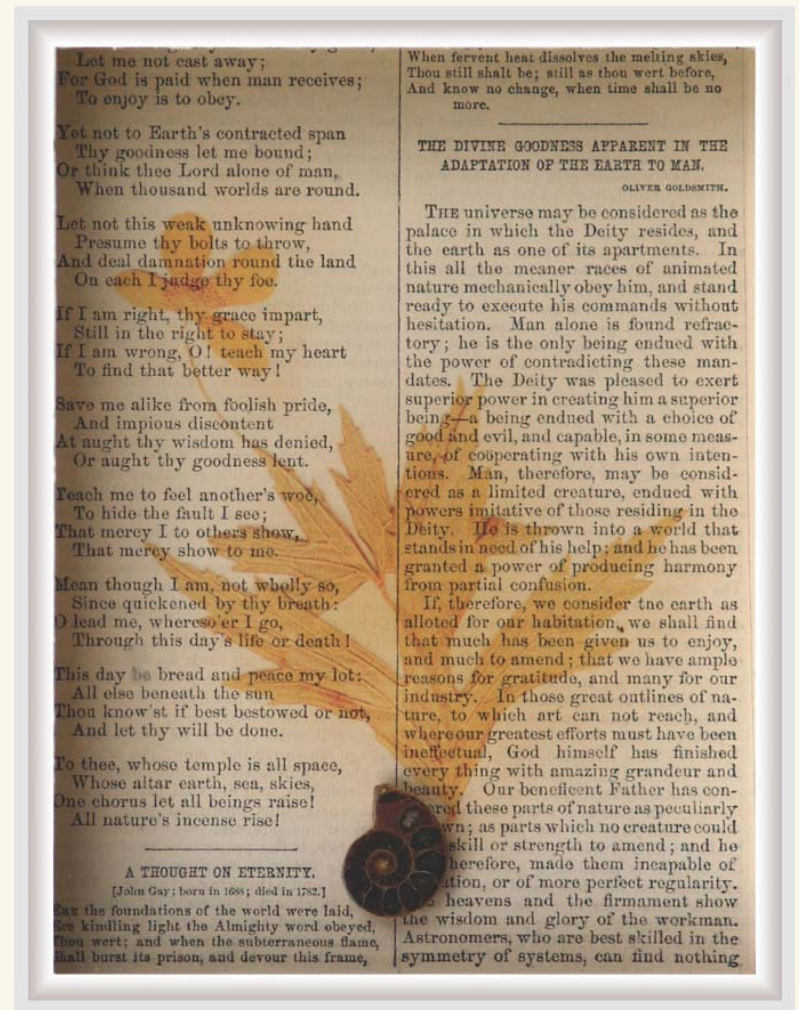
Understanding Abma's work both as conceptually based and as a performative act offers a necessary entry point from which to consider her work. Spending months writing and developing her concepts, the centrality of the idea is paramount to her artistic practice. Strictly speaking, conceptual artists set out to subvert the preciousness and exclusivity of the art object, focusing on the idea rather than the tangible and commodified object, but for our purposes I'm referring to a conceptually based art practice that synthesizes the idea with visual considerations of the object. At the same time, the discourse of process and trace is a central concern for many conceptual artists which for Abma, is equally important. In that regard one might consider her work as mere traces of the almost obsessive, ritualized process she undertakes in the creation of her work. Consider the process of patiently reading, selecting then meticulously scribing excerpts from 30 years of trip diaries onto a canvas, only to cover them up with paint (*Memoirs of a Lifelong Traveler*); or the utterance of her fears onto a panel only to paint over them and with that act, release and bury them in the hopes that they, like the tangible objects of our personal and collective history, may be transformed (*Transform My Fears*). What is permanent is what is left behind as a result of this performative act: the 'trace' or the 'footprint' of her utterance is what remains to be unearthed sometime in the future. By choosing to allow traces of her fears to remain legible, Abma is inviting the viewer to participate in the construction of the work's meaning by offering a possibility for critical self-awareness: the opportunity for the viewer to reflect on what they are leaving as they pass through.



Taking a more objective approach to the question of performativity, *Legacy* becomes more than a simple portrayal of humanity's struggle between nature and technology. Here, Abma substitute's binary codes for the letters of the alphabet, drawing attention to the relationship between our modern technological preoccupation with the preservation of knowledge and self, and the organic preservation process of fossilization. Abma visually and metaphorically compresses these codified meanings somewhere between the earth and sky – that *thin place* between temporality and eternity.

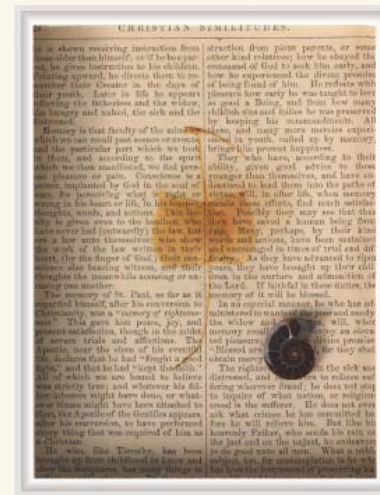
Throughout this body of work, Abma works with the relationship of image and text: a relationship that is as interesting as it is complicated within contemporary artistic practice. The strength in the juxtaposition of text and image is in their suggestion of something beyond the obvious. Consider the *Looking Glass* shadowbox constructions. A trace of someone's past has been unearthed, re-collected, re-organized and brought into the present. In this series Abma juxtaposes selected pages from a 19th century book of "comforting" essays with scanned images of the found personal objects collected by the original owner who had pressed them between the pages. Abma then selected and added ammonite fossil shells which are universally recognized as symbols of the complexity of life. She then organized these objects into a series of seven still life memory box compositions. The careful arrangement of text, fossil, pressed plant or lock of hair is presented not as a record of what was seen by people but as a record of what was and of what it has become in the present. With these works time has been compressed and brought into the present directing our attention to the fact that meaning depends not on what has come before, but on the state of things today. The question of mortality is always a subtext of the still life and the past is always shaped by the prevailing winds of the present. But as Abma's work stresses, an object's (or a human's) temporality in relation to historical fact is perhaps its most unquestioned condition.

As Canadians, there is no denying that our landscape has been central to our lives since the beginning. Its massive size and varied form have shaped our history, our culture, and our own concepts of self. The obvious connection between the Canadian landscape as a path to understanding who we are and Abma's inclusion of the iconic road trip not only evokes a sense of nostalgia it brings a familiar context to the esoteric questions she is addressing – who am I, why am I here and what happens next? Wrapping around a twelve foot free-standing wall in the centre of the gallery space, *The Great Canadian Road Trip 1: Bonair* reads like a monument. The monument as an object that preserves, honors and perpetuates memory has become a central subject of critical discourse relating to our existence. Serving as a lasting reminder of our responsibility to the place in which we live, a monument interrupts the repetitiveness of everyday life causing us to pause and reflect. Abma embeds fossilized remnants of her most recent road trip across Canada into the painting and it is this tension between the past and present that drives the work. The present tense is revealed when the viewer discovers that embedded in the ancient landforms of the Alberta landscape alongside

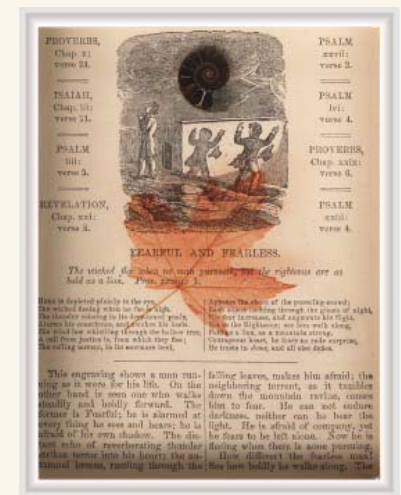


Looking Glass 1, 2007

shadowbox construction with found objects and fossil



Looking Glass 3, 2007



Looking Glass 5, 2007

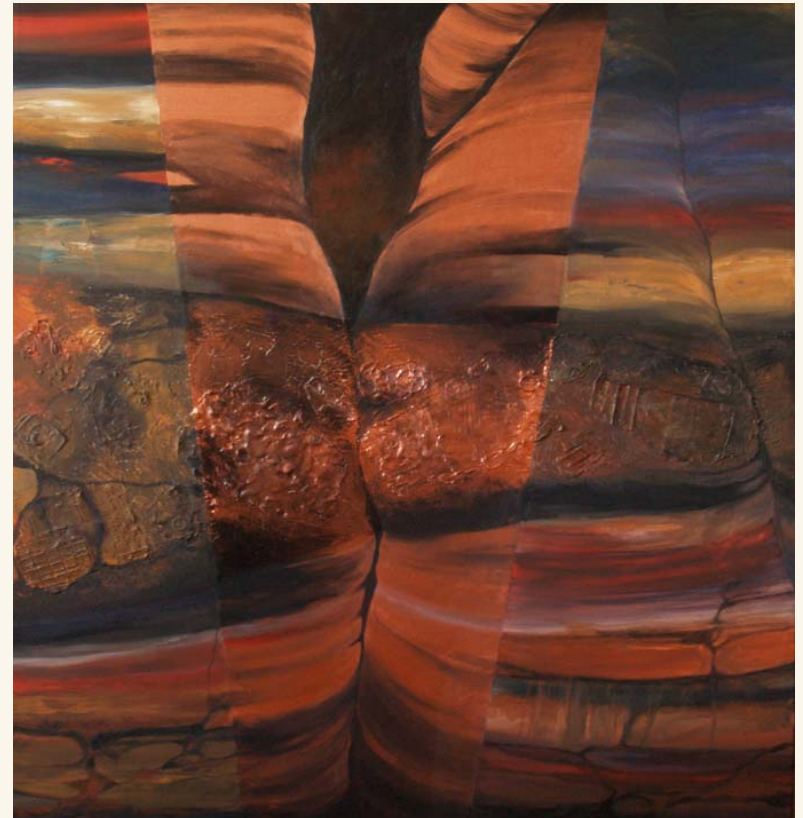
the pre-historic dinosaur bones, are fossilizations of a Tim Horton's coffee logo, broken strappings from the tent trailer and other familiar remnants of the contemporary iconic Canadian journey. The Canadian road trip stands as a monument to self and to nationhood speaking to the implications of our presence beyond the immediate.

The range of religious, moral, philosophic and social ideas that have been projected onto landscape painting is daunting. Consider the words of the German writer Wilhelm Wackenroder in *Outpourings from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar*, 1797.

I know of two miraculous languages through which the Creator has enabled men to grasp and understand things in all their power, or at least so much of them – to put it more modestly - that mortals can grasp. They enter into us by ways other than words, they move us suddenly, miraculously seizing our entire self, penetrating into our every nerve and drop of blood. One of these miraculous languages is spoken only by God, the other is spoken by a few chosen men whom he has lovingly anointed. They are: *Nature and Art*.

Considering the historic connection between nature and art as routes to spiritual understanding and knowledge of self, placing the work of Abma within the tradition of landscape art now seems logical. Within the framework of peregrinatio the meditative process that Abma undergoes in the creation of her work is significant. By inviting us to bear witness to the traces of her process, she encourages the viewer to pause and acknowledge the traces that they are leaving for future retrieval and de-coding. It is in and among these traces, embedded within the landscape that we can discover the patterns of connectivity to self, each other and to the cosmos. ●

Lisa Daniels, BFA, MA
Curator



Alchemy: The Philosopher's Stone, 2007
gouache, gesso, and acrylic on canvas



The Great Canadian Road Trip 1: Bonair, 2007 (detail)
gouache and gesso on 5 canvas panels

List of Works

Threshold, 2007

gouache on canvas
36" x 36"

Legacy, 2007

gouache and gesso on canvas
42" x 68"

I Am, 2008

gouache, gesso, and acrylic on canvas
42" x 68"

Transform my Fears, 2007

gouache, gesso, and acrylic on canvas
42" x 68"

Remember Me, 2006

gouache and photographic collage on canvas
24" x 24"

Mandorla, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 24"

Chambers, 2007

gouache, gesso, and photographic collage on canvas
24" x 24"

Remembrance of What We Shared, 2007

gouache and computer-generated photographic
images on canvas
24" x 24"

Chimera, 2007

gouache and gesso on canvas
24" x 24"

Memoirs of a Lifelong Traveler, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 24"

Where Am I Going? Where Have I Been?, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 24"

Petrified Wood with Victorian Landscape Painting, 2007

watercolour and gouache on canvas
24" x 48"

The Elements, 2007

watercolour and gouache on watercolour canvas
24" x 48"

Artifice, 2007

gouache on watercolour canvas
24" x 48"

Dwelling, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 48"

Peregrinatio, 2007

gouache on watercolour canvas
24" x 48"

Petrified Wood with Vessels and Tesserae, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 48"

Fracture, 2007

gouache on canvas
24" x 48"

The Great Canadian Road Trip 1: Bonair, 2007

gouache and gesso on 5 canvas panels
48" x 144"

**The Great Canadian Road Trip 2: Conversations
Along the Trans Canada**, 2008

gouache and gesso on 5 canvas panels
48" x 144"

Alchemy: The Philosopher's Stone, 2007

gouache, gesso, and acrylic on canvas
36" x 48"

Alchemy: The Elixir of Life, 2008

gouache, gesso, gold leaf and acrylic on canvas
36" x 48"

Shadow Boxes

shadowbox construction with found objects and fossil
7" x 8.5"

Looking Glass 1, 2007

Looking Glass 2, 2007

Looking Glass 3, 2007

Looking Glass 4, 2007

Looking Glass 5, 2007

Looking Glass 6, 2007

Looking Glass 7, 2007

Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions

- 2008 *Peregrinatio*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 2003 *If Remembered*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 2000 *Just for the Fun of It*, Gallery in the Grove, Bright's Grove, Ontario
- 1999 *All Good Gifts*, Vision Nursing and Rest Home, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1997 *Tapestries*, Gallery in the Grove, Bright's Grove, Ontario
- 1994 *Changing Faces*, Gallery in the Grove, Bright's Grove, Ontario

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2007 *A New Breed*, LovArt Gallery/Grace Brothers Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario
- 2007 *Tuktu Prayers*, Yellowhead Museum, Jasper Alberta
- 2007 *Tuktu Prayers*, Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum, Banff, Alberta
- 2006 *Tuktu Prayers*, Alberta Legislature, Edmonton, Alberta
- 2006 *Gallery Lambton Miniature Exhibition*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 2006 *Gallery Lambton Inspires*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 2000, 2001
- 2003, 2006 *LOOK*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1992-2002
- 2005, 2006 Studio Tour, Lambton County
- 2002 *Paint the Huron Shores*, Lambton Heritage Museum, Grand Bend, Ontario
- 1997, 1998 *Art in the Heart of London*, St. Paul's Cathedral, London, Ontario
- 1996-1998 *The Guild Show*, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1996 *Escape Routes: The Guild*, Gallery in the Grove
- 1993 *Niches*, Bear Creek Studio—Two-artist show with Pam Wong, Sarnia, Ontario

Collections

- Gallery Lambton Inspires, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
Boy in My Studio, 2006 watercolour and gouache
- Lambton Hospital Group, Sarnia, Ontario
I was Having a Dream, 2000 watercolour
- Vision Nursing and Rest Home, Sarnia, ON
Commission of eight portraits of residents, 1997
- Vision Nursing and Rest Home, Sarnia, ON
Purchase of a series of paintings from All Good Gifts, 1999

Awards, Grants, Bursaries

- 2003 Ontario Arts Council Exhibition Grant
- 1994 Wolff Award, Sarnia Artists' Workshop

Professional Experience

- 2003 Juror: Lambton County Secondary School Art Exhibition, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1997-2001 Instructor at Lambton College, Sarnia, ON
- 1997- 2001 Credit Courses taught (1997- 2001):
Art 320-3 (Watercolour I), Art 420-3 (Watercolour II),
Art 520-3 (Watercolour III), Art 620-3 (Watercolour IV)
These courses include technical instruction in watercolour,

Art History and Art Criticism

- 1999 Non-Credit Courses taught: Figure Painting in Watercolour
- 1995-2007 Watercolour Instructor
Teaches private watercolour classes to adults and senior-high school students

Workshop Leadership/Lectures

- 2006 Gave Workshop in Watercolour for Brush and Palette Club, London, Ontario
- 2006 Participated/led student workshop in "Arts for Africa", Strathroy, Ontario
- 2003 Brescia College, University of Western Ontario- guest for alumni panel discussion Guest Speaker, University Women's Club, Sarnia, ON
- 1997 Led a Workshop on how to teach Watercolour to Intermediate-Senior students at the
- 1996 Ontario Christian School Teachers' Association Convention
Led a Workshop on how to set up an art show with students' artwork at the Ontario
- 1996 Christian School Teachers' Association Convention
- 1993 Led a Workshop on teaching Art to teachers at the Chatham District Professional Development Day

Committee Work and Community Service in Visual Arts

- 1997-2000 Organized and Chaired the Sarnia/Lambton Artists' Studio Tour
- 1994-1998 Wrote, edited and published the Newsletter for the Sarnia-Lambton Arts Council
- 1992-1995 Served on the Sarnia Artists' Workshop Executive
- 1993-1994 Acted as Convenor for Art at the Bay

Front Cover:

The Great Canadian Road Trip: Bonair, 2007
gouache and gesso on canvas (5 panels)



Peregrinatio is an ancient word that in its broadest sense means pilgrimage. The term is also used metaphorically to describe an inner, spiritual journey or quest.



Mission Statement

"Gallery Lambton will manage a Canadian Collection, will showcase artists and their works, and will provide an environment to increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of visual art".

