

Su Schnee's work exists somewhere between the abstract and the figurative, between the personal and the public, between the emotional and the intellectual. In her earlier work, Schnee has often fused the landscape with the body. The body grows out of the earth's multifarious and constantly changing shapes, and mountains, clouds and the sea are an integral part of the body's curves and textures. Schnee has never shied away from the body and the way the body communicates with the physical world. In all of her work, she is resolutely concerned about the way the body moves in and out of the earth, how it is kindred to the physical world that much of civilization sees as little more than a hindrance or a curiosity. In this most recent work, contiguous notions of body and landscape have been given new colours, relationships and permutations.

In these new paintings, the personal – the body, the face – is everywhere present. Eyes look back at the viewer; faces search the canvas; lips, fingers and bodies float among the clouds, trees and waters. Sometimes hiding within or melded with the landscape, sometimes right there front and centre, the faces are neither tortured nor distant, but sympathetic, welcoming and accommodating.

Together with the personal images that inform these paintings, there is also a sense of what Jung called the collective unconscious – that collection of archetypes that we all inherit and yet that remain forever mysterious to us. Schnee has travelled extensively and there is a painterly attempt to bring some of this universal mythology to the work. Clouds traverse the canvases, softening edges and clothing everything in a colorful shroud; mountains seem to tremble and quake; water laps at the limits of the earth and sky; orbs of light meander across the

paintings, representing brilliant suns or brooding circles of darkness or labyrinthine mandalas. There is no desire within these paintings to explain or delineate each aspect of the mind. Instead, what we have is a landscape and a mindscape in constant movement, searching for questions rather than answers; sensing the whispers of thought and wind; wondering about the many images and icons that connect us with the earth but that we can never hope to explain. How to understand the myths that the world presents to us and that we fabricate for ourselves – this seems to be the reach of these paintings.

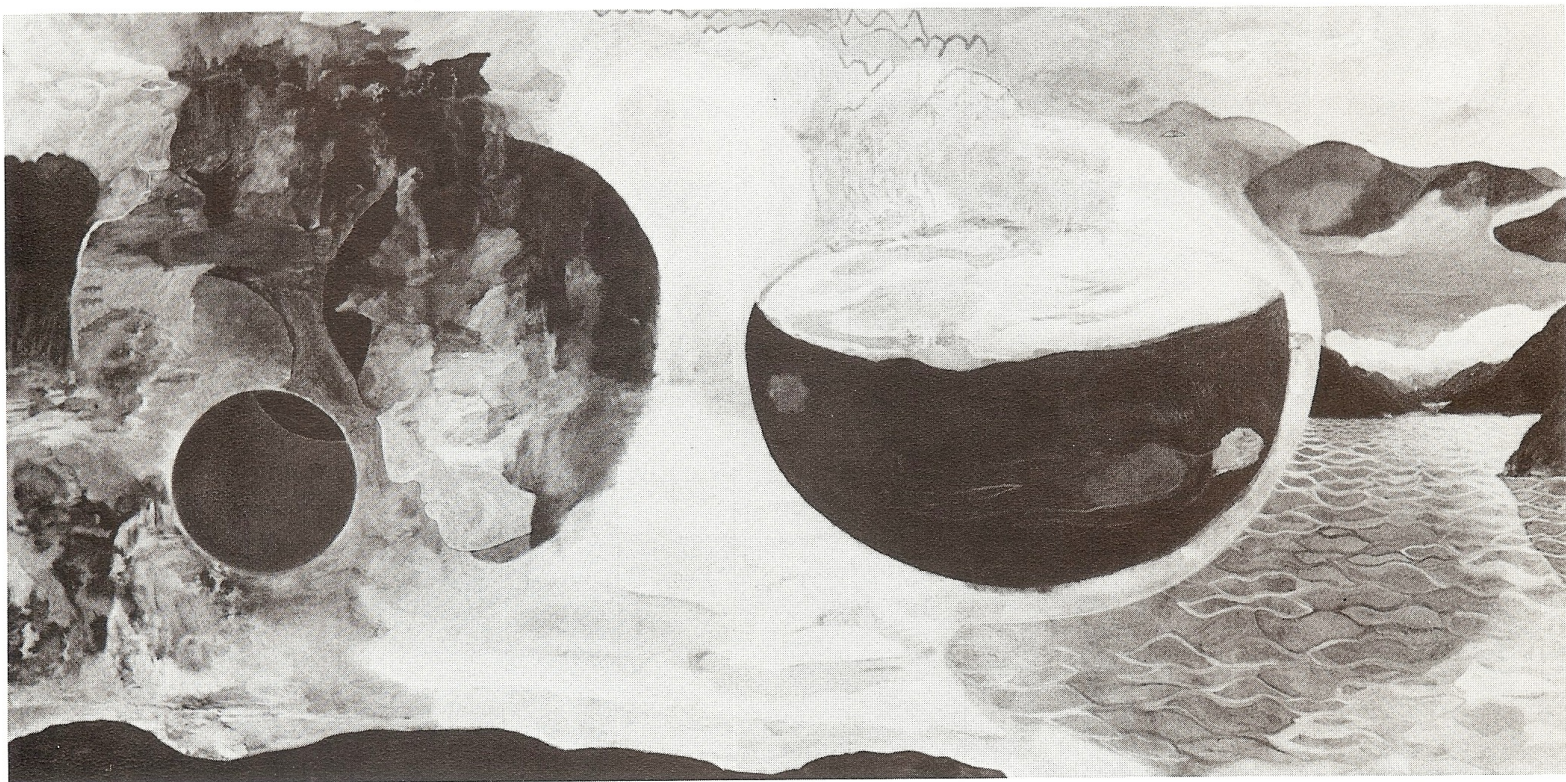
Together with the large works, Schnee also exhibited a collection of small cloud drawings, several of them very subtly and wistfully

drawn – the gusts of charcoal perfect companions for the gusts of the clouds. As well, there was a wall of found objects, some from nature, some manufactured, all self-contained, crystalline nuggets of the world taken out of their environment. Mounting found objects on the gallery wall is not a new idea but these few dozen objects – a scrap of bark, a bit of wire, a shell – all had a resonance of simple importance – of memory, of a simple statement of beauty.

Another element of the show was a collection of three short texts with the same titles as the three largest paintings. Although the stories are meant to complement the paintings, they seemed to me to limit rather than enliven them. Much of what Schnee is

attempting in the paintings is beyond words – an approximation of the way the mind, body, spirit and nature are one. The stories, unfortunately, tend toward the cute and sentimental. Their secrets stay on the page rather than entering the mind of the reader. The paintings, by contrast, are not restrictive or restrained. They have a curious and intangible life that the viewer can return to again and again and that will cast a different light into each new imagination that comes to them.

PETER O'BRIEN



Su Schnee
Oosank / The Voyage to Emoh (1989-91)
 Oil on linen, 198 x 471 cm