

Ann Mikolowski at Center Galleries (Work sample #10)

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Ann Mikolowski (1940-1999) was an active artist her whole life, though she was better known in literary circles. For some three decades, she and her husband, poet Ken Mikolowski, ran the Alternative Press, publishing broadsides, chapbooks and other material by leading figures in postwar American letters. She was emerging nationally as an artist—Alternative Press poet and critic John Yau had included her work in a 1998 show at New York's Apexart alongside that of Bill Jensen, Jasper Johns and Richard Tuttle—when breast cancer overtook her at age 59. The Center Galleries exhibition, curated by director Michelle Perron (formerly of Art et Industrie), brought together for the first time two aspects of Mikolowski's art, her miniature portraits and her much larger nature paintings. The juxtaposition took its cue from the poem "Two Ways of Looking in a Mirror" by the artist's friend Robert Creeley.

Of the two series, the portraits are more widely known, primarily for their subjects, among them John Ashbery, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. These paintings can be held in the palm of the hand, although what's depicted within their frames is exponentially bigger. Ron Padgett and Ken Mikolowski (1982) shows the pair standing on the corner of 13th Street in New York's East Village, with First Avenue stretching back diagonally behind them. Pedestrians, traffic, signage and tenements are rendered with meticulous brushwork, using tools trimmed down to one or two bristles.

In a 1983 portrait of Joe Brainard, his lithe body fills the picture plane. He's clad in a wide-open blue shirt and black Speedo bathing suit, hinting at his own erotically charged work. A penetrating stare reinforces the figure's frontality. The painting viscerally captures not only the likeness but the spirit of one whose persona Edmund White once described as "hypnotic."

While much grander in scale (up to nearly 8 feet wide), the paintings of land and water are intimate as they capture moments of existential reflection. Spectrum (1986) depicts a choppy Lake Huron below an overcast sky, the distinction between water and atmosphere barely apparent in a flickering field of blue and white brushstrokes. In the center, a faint pink pulsates up from beneath layers of pigment, imbuing the otherwise chilly scene with warmth, made all the more poignant by knowledge of the color's fugitive nature and the likelihood of its eventually fading away.

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