

# Donna Ross – The Shape of Life

## Visual Description

This exhibit is of 15 artworks of various sizes and various types of media – mainly acrylic on canvas and photographs printed on steel panels. They are hung with one or two pieces to a panel. There are four double sided panels, covered with a light grey linen, stacked in a line, running north-south. The panel faces also point north-south. The panels are numbered 1 through 8, with 1 being the northernmost panel, 2 being the south facing panel on the rear side of panel 1, and so on, through panel 8 being the southernmost panel.

Donna Ross notes about her exhibit, “The artwork created for this exhibit is meant to be seen as an opportunity for contemplative, private and sacred questioning. What is beyond the curtain of our humanity, what is the shape of life? Are we more than ash, air, dust and ruby red desires? How does it feel to look at the bellowing starkness within? What causes us to bloom and what leads us to close up and wither away? You can't know if you can't see and you can't see if you refuse to look, so peer beyond the safety and confines of your own garden gate, blossoming awaits.

“Sometimes we just have to stand still and gaze deeper, quiet the mind, slow the breath and focus our attention. Stay for a while and then stay a little longer still. A closer look will reveal what is meant to be seen only by you. Linger long enough to get uncomfortable, perhaps in order to really see one must analyze less and engage more. Ask yourself what it is to be an organic, energetic, spiritual being. The shape of life is an invitation to dive into the light as much as it beckons you to walk bravely into the shadows.

“What remains when you take away the colour?” This is the question I look at in my exhibition *The Shape of Life*, a show that explores mostly monochromatic expression and its emphasis on shape, contour, and texture, the exploration of homogeneous, of black, white, and neutral.

“This exhibition comprises works on canvas, with charcoal, acrylic, and pastel presenting the diversity possible within the constraints of conformity, where material expression emerges from nothingness, and nothingness takes on the material properties of texture and shape. It is a show that explores diversity in an abstract way, as an underlying cultural structure, highlighting the limitations of polarity, a blending of different possibilities, providing a wider vocabulary for monochromatic expression.

“For me, monochrome is a way of expressing the fluidity of form and the shifting organic quality that underlies the material world.

“I try in my work to express the hope of life and the decay of life. I think what remains when you take away as much colour as possible is the underlying structure. Something else emerges to fill the void. Something expressed in the language of tonal value, and the dynamics of gradation.

“Pause, don't rush away. There is something here for you.”

Donna Ross is a New Westminster-based artist.

### **Panel 2 – Rise Up (26”x48”)**

The second panel has the largest work in the show on it, taking up nearly the full width of the panel. It is an abstract acrylic painting in shades of grey, white, black, tan and brown. Progressing from top left to bottom right, the painting has a few strong diagonal lines of movement that draw the eye vertically (slight left to slight right). These lines are not straight lines per se, but rather areas of movement in the abstract shapes. There are similar horizontal movement lines, and put together, the lines of movement gradually coalesce to suggest ladders that are leaning against a wall. There is some mixing of the colours, in particular the dark grey and darker brown, but in general, the colours stay distinct. However they are also layered as opposed to mixed, so through the light tan that predominates the top left corner, you can see some white shapes and brush strokes underneath. Brush strokes and abstract shapes are bold and full of vigor and with the layered effect suggest dark corners, tangled emotions, slippery sections and not an easy path. But all the same, the ladder image rising up comes through.

### **Panel 3 – What We Leave Behind (12”x36”) and Ghosts of the Past (12”x36”)**

This piece is hung with two matching-sized paintings that are long and thin, hung vertically. These paintings are more monochromatic than the previous painting, with mostly white, black and grey, and just a touch of brown mixed in in parts. On the left, *What We Leave Behind* is the darker of the two works, with black and dark grey predominating. As in the first described painting, the colours are layered rather than blended. Into the top layer the artist has scratched some rough circles and other lines, often centering around a dark area. The overall feeling of this work is darker and jumbled. By contrast, the outside edges of the stretched canvas are white (with some grey that drips over the edge) and the body of the painting mostly sits in from the very edge of the canvas about 1 cm, almost as if it shrinks back from the edges of the frame. The painting on the right, *Ghosts of the Past*, is lighter both in colour and in brush strokes. While it still has similar circular scratches on the surface, the overall feeling of the shapes is like bubbles or clouds that are rising to the top of the frame. There is a large black section in the bottom third of the painting, but the colour becomes gradually lighter the higher up the frame. In contrast, the outside edges of the canvas are painted black.

### **Panel 5 – Beach Day (12”x12”)**

This image is a black and white photograph printed on a thin steel plate, which hangs on the right side of the panel. The metal can't be seen on the front of the photo, but the finish is very shiny with a crisp image. The photo is dominated by a completely blank, white sky which takes up the top 2/3 of the image. The beach in the bottom third has three distinct layers and the greys and blacks are tinged ever so slightly with sepia. Just under the sky is a very hazy, light grey layer which blends seamlessly into the white sky above. Under that is a strip of beach with dimpled, wetter sand, strewn with dark clumps, likely clumps of seaweed. There are other smaller dark specks of other ocean detritus. At the very bottom of the image (closest to the viewer) is a strip of drier, lighter sand, which is heavily imprinted with footprints. These layers of beach are not exactly horizontal but ever so slightly diagonal – higher on the left and descending slightly to the right. The overall feel of the image is extreme stillness and calm.

**Panel 6 – Elegy (12”x36”)**

This painting is another long, thin canvas hung vertically. It is on the left side of the panel with a smaller painting beside it. Unlike the other images I have described, this painting has a lighter, more ethereal feel although overall the colours are darker. The grey, white and black colours dominate, but the browns are warmer and are mixed with some red, looking almost gold or bronze-like. The background of this painting is mostly this warm grey, and there is a large shape that is mostly dark grey and brown with just a few white highlights. Above this shape is a white cloud-like shape that is thinly applied paint but with some thicker white edges. It is surrounded by three small, irregularly shaped black blobs. Another black blob is on the left side of the central shape, and two more are below it. The surface of these three lower blobs is scratched in circular or linear patterns.

**Panel 8 – Wishbone (12”x12”)**

This image is another black and white but ever-so-slightly sepia photograph on a steel plate. The background is pure white, and shows an intact chicken wishbone displayed in a V shape. The bone is overexposed with minimal detail or natural texture visible, but with a strong shadow cast from a light on the right. The shadow fills in some of our knowledge of the shape of this bone that isn't visible with the overexposure – rounded tips, slight curve up and away from the table – and gives a movement to the simple shape. The image is not particularly crisp, and the grainy texture gives a bone-like texture (slightly porous) to the shadow.