Walking in to Carol Mahtab’s light-filled studio shortly after she died, it felt like she had just stepped out for tea. The air was heavy with turpentine and her palate thick with paint. The CD player had Arvo Pärt in the dock, books on Zen Buddhism and poetry lined the shelves. Her last painting was still wet when it was hung in her final show. Carol herself was too ill to attend the opening, and she died a few weeks later.

Carol’s space in Sandy Cove, Nova Scotia, bore witness to her long and prolific career. On the lower floor stood easels, work-tables, tins of brushes, drawers of sketch books, and scattered works in progress. The upstairs housed a 60-year retrospective of paintings organized in upright structures. The floor was covered with dozens of canvases that had been removed from their stretchers for re-use.

Born Carol Armour in Montreal, 1935, she studied at the Montreal School of Art and the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, UK. She came home to teach at the Montreal School alongside Arthur Lismer. In her early 20s she married, had two children (John and Iona), divorced, remarried, and - uncharacteristically for women of the time - never stopped making art.

Carol’s young family moved to California where her husband Ashraf Mahtab completed his PhD. They moved where Ashraf’s work took them: Denver, St. Catharines, Poughkeepsie NY, New York City, Italy and Japan. All the while Carol made art wherever she could: in the living room, garage, back-room, attic, then finally a studio of her own.

Her early work in the 60s (woodcuts, water colour and collage) reflected an interest in mythology, feminism, spirituality, and various themes ranging from childbirth to landscapes. She was also interested in microscopic images, and learned how to make her own slides.

In the 70s and 80s, works in oil reflected her growing interest in abstraction, shapes, colour fields, and space. Carol endlessly explored the juxtaposition of tension and rest in composition.

Her work got bigger as her spaces allowed, and she continually pushed the boundaries of what constituted a piece. She loved working in multiples, combining as many as 16 canvases to comprise a single work.
Carol was frugal and resourceful, creating simple and elegant textures in both domestic and studio life. She made everything: the family’s clothing (formal wear, pajamas, coats, sleeping bags), wall-hangings, drapes and upholstery with fine crewel-stitching, all original designs. Canvases stretched with upholstery tacks and home-made frames became part of her signature style.

In later years, when frugality was less of an economic necessity, Carol continued to live a minimalist lifestyle. Her son John says her only extravagances were fine silk scarves and the highest quality paint, spending as much as $50 on a single tube.

The chronology of Carol’s oeuvre is not entirely clear. She never signed her work, and often did not title or date them. She occasionally painted over paintings or re-used stretchers. Following her death, Ashraf arranged for a database to be created in an effort to catalogue her work.

Sandy Cove was always Carol’s summer refuge, purchased by her mother for the family when she was a child. Work done in her Sandy Cove studio (built in 1993) resonates with fog and quiet, a world grounded in place, both physical and spiritual. There is a care, an intention with each mark, each brush stroke. Abstracted images revealing as much as they conceal, presence made audible by absence, a sense of mystery that is compelling.

While the work is never literal or didactic, it reflects her fiercely passionate love of nature. Indeed she was an environmental activist, at times putting the studio on hold to fight for the protection of the natural world.

Carol explored life’s most profound meanings through her work, each painting bearing witness to the unknowability of her search, a solitary restlessness immersed in the sacred, 

*surrounded by a grace of sense, a white light still and moving**.

-- Janet Larkman, Curator

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*from TS Elliott’s Four Quartets
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ARTsPLACE Artist-run-Centre
Annapolis Region Community Arts Council
396 St. George Street, Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia
902-532-7069
www.arcac.ca

CAROL MAHTAB, 1935-2012
still and moving
August 30 - October 4, 2015