

A satirist quietly ridicules Duffy, Harper, Trudeau and the political circus



PETER SIMPSON - THE BIG BEAT

[More from Peter Simpson - The Big Beat](#)

Published on: May 8, 2015 | Last Updated: May 11, 2015 5:18 PM EDT



Court of Law Painter 20, a collage by artist Allan MacKay, who is quietly satirizing the political circus in an old-fashioned way.

The digital age has wrought many things, and gentleness is not among them. Today we're all critics in a web of blogs and social media, and too often our criticisms are gobs of anonymous vitriol that, distilled to their essence, say "u suk!!!"

Allan MacKay offers something from another age, quieter and more contemplative. Amid the digital dissonance it is a balm for those who see it, those few friends or acquaintances who were in touch when MacKay launched, as a lark, his series of collage cartoons.

"I have a giant subscription list of about a dozen, basically because it started out as a kind of joke among friends," says MacKay, over the phone from his home in Banff.

MacKay is an acclaimed Canadian artist, with works in various media in galleries and collections across the country, and he's done two tours as an

official Canadian war artist in Afghanistan and Somalia. Now, almost daily, he gently pokes at Parliament Hill's most plainly ridiculous political sideshow, the trial of Senator Mike Duffy.

"It's a complete farce, and I mean that in theatrical terms," says MacKay, who, like Duffy, is from Prince Edward Island — and who understands how islanders were "were so pissed off" by Duffy's appointment, because "if you've been away for 30 or 40 years, to represent the island is a bit of a joke." Now, for so many, the trial is "just the gift that keeps on giving."



Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Liberal leader Justin Trudeau celebrate the passage of controversial bill C-51, in a collage by Allan MacKay.

There may be someone who isn't familiar with the rise and fall of the man who, without irony or, apparently, self-awareness, calls himself "the OI' Duff," so here's a primer: Duffy is the TV personality ("journalist" being a contentious term to describe his style) who for decades lobbied any prime minister he could find for an appointment to the Senate, that hall of haughty airs and draughty rules. Duffy's desire to be in the Upper Chamber was so bald that it's surprising he didn't lobby prime ministers from other countries

that have senates to fill.

When, a few years ago, Prime Minister Stephen Harper raised Duffy to our Senate, it quickly became a be-careful-what-you-wish-for fable. Duffy was a portly Icarus, with wings built of hubris and expense claims, who flew too close to the trough. Exposed, toppled and booted from the Senate, he's now in court to fight charges of misusing the public's money.

Media coverage of the trial is extensive, as journalists and analysts and pundits and editorial cartoonists all weigh in, with a general tone of aghast glee. In the background of this news cacophony are MacKay's collages, perhaps unique in their quietude and — for now, at least — their exclusivity. The series began as a comment on Alberta politics, first with the doomed Conservative premier Alison Redford, then with doomed Conservative premier Jim Prentice, then with doomed Wildrose leader turned Conservative floor-crosser Danielle Smith, and, most recently, with New Democrat Rachel Notley, now deemed premier. In a collage titled "The New Math" and emailed the day after Alberta's era-ending election, Notley beams behind a podium, while the three male party leaders — Prentice, Wildrose's Brian Jean, the Liberal's David Swann — hold a sign that says "Polls?" or tumble with hoops, or beat a drum, like a three-ring circus of losers.



Allan MacKay's collage after this week's era-ending election in Alberta, with premier-elect Rachel Notley and three defeated, male party leaders.

Duffy became a target for MacKay, because how could he not? Their acquaintance goes way back to Charlottetown in the 1960s, and though MacKay says “we didn’t hang out that much,” he recalls how he advised the young Duff on what new records to buy, which Duffy would play as DJ at the Basilica Rec Centre on Saturday nights.

Did MacKay later get an unexpected cheque from Senator Duffy for those long-ago services — surprise cheques, at taxpayers’ expense, and filtered through a private company — being a hallmark of Duffy’s brief senatorial reign? MacKay chuckles and says, “There are some things we can’t say yet because it’s all before the courts.”

The spectacularly hapless fall and current trial may seem to be beyond satire — such as that moment in Halifax two years ago when Duffy, attempting to flee through a hotel kitchen to avoid reporters, told his former colleagues to “go report some adult news.” Or the sight of Duffy’s defence lawyer, Donald Bayne, effectively arguing there were no Senate rules that required his client

to spend the ol' taxpayers' money wisely — that Duffy was, one might say in a Dingwall-ian flourish, entitled to his irresponsibilities. How to satirize something that is so perfectly absurd?

MacKay comes to the task with an anachronistic flair, in collages that look like something out of *The Spectator* magazine in the mid-19th century. They are created on his computer to look rustic in every way — in colour tones, in political tones, in juxtapositions, and in settings.

The key figure in the images is the court painter, a role played here by MacKay's old friend John Will, an artist and former professor in Calgary. "The court painter is a throwback to the notion of the court, the royal courts," says MacKay.

There's no dialogue in the collages, and usually no text. MacKay arranges photographs of the political players in courtrooms, or staterooms boardrooms, or art studios. Duffy smiles, or glowers. Harper has raised glowering to an art form — not the first to do it, but better than all the others, like Picasso with Cubism — though he is physically able to smile, and sometimes seems curiously distracted.

The supporting cast includes the other fallen senator, Pamela Wallin, looking out imperiously over her glasses and holding a piglet in her lap. The PM's dispatched advisor Nigel Wright shows up, as do Conservative senators Marjory LeBreton and Carolyn Stewart-Olsen, and even "the other icon of PEI," Anne of Green Gables — who once astutely said, "Life is worth living as long as there's a laugh in it."

Among the players works the court painter, old and wise and complacently bemused, his ubiquitous cigarette trailing a thick waft of smoke. "The smoke becomes as much a character as the painter (with its) connotations of things being consumed by fire, things going up in smoke," MacKay says. There's usually a bomb, of the ACME sort favoured by Wile E. Coyote, because "whatever the setting is, whoever the people are, the possibility of it all blowing up" is imminent.

It's not the first time MacKay has made a political protest. Three years ago on Parliament Hill he tore up works that he had completed as a war artist, because he didn't like "how people were being treated" by the Harper government. "It just culminated in a desire to make some public action, because many of us feel disempowered in the way the machinery works." (MacKay dryly notes, "Some people thought I should rip up all my

work.”)

Does he consider his collages to be partisan?

“I guess there’s no way that they wouldn’t be,” he says, “in the sense that if someone is a satirist — if you take these as satire — there’s a critique involved, and the critique I guess does have a partisan kind of flavour to it, because it’s in opposition to the ruling authority.” Then he adds, “I always like the line, ‘No matter who you vote for, the government always gets in.’” It’s notable that his Alberta collages target all parties, and MacKay also satirizes Justin Trudeau, as he did a few months ago after the federal Liberal leader’s tin-eared embrace of the politically toxic Conservative floor-crosser Eve Adams, and as he did late this week with a scene of Trudeau and Harper in a warm embrace, celebrating passage of the controversial security bill C-51, with a Trojan Horse and a glaring Papa Trudeau in the background. The title is Charter? What Charter?



Allan MacKay protests on Parliament Hill in 2012 by tearing up his own work as an official Canadian war artist. (Photo Jean Levac, Ottawa Citizen)

Satire may not be dead in the digital age, but it has evolved into something louder and less subtle. Its primary soapbox is television, from the yappy rants of Rick Mercer to the studio-audience love-ins of Jon Stewart and his late-night descendants. In this modern arena, MacKay’s satire is more artful, more reflective, and goes not for the quick laugh but for the thoughtful chuckle.

MacKay has no clear end date for his project, although, “if all of a sudden the world turns to my favour, what would I have to criticize?”

Until then, his collages deserve to be seen by more people. There may be an exhibition in the Banff-area, he says. Meanwhile, anyone who wants to see his twice or thrice-weekly collages can sign up, free of charge, to his email list, at ahmackay@hotmail.com.

psimpson@ottawacitizen.com