

## ALWAYS THERE'S RETURNING

Allan Harding MacKay came back to Charlottetown on September 13, 1992 as the first artist-in-residence at the CCAG&M. In a program financed by The Canada Council, MacKay spent two months at the art gallery creating his huge signature drawings, talking to staff and interacting with artists in the community. The CCAG&M plans to bring professional artists to the gallery every spring and fall as a part of an ongoing exchange program. It was particularly fitting that MacKay, born and raised on the Island, should be the first visiting artist-in-residence.

Returning home is nostalgic, home-baked apple pie fare for our fast food metropolitan audiences, but MacKay is a person without a home who nevertheless is always returning home. Or, perhaps, he is at home everywhere. Or everywhere is at home in him. The huge drawings of feet and hands which he executed in Charlottetown are certainly not sentimental or nostalgic. But once seen, unforgettable, like growing up on island where the monumental childhood experience of ocean permeates dream and reality for a lifetime.

MacKay studied art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the late sixties. At the mention of NSCAD art world antennae go up and the international school where the newest fashions in art rooted themselves in the late sixties and early seventies leaps to mind. MacKay was one of these students who came to NSCAD when the art course was still basically late 19th century academic training sessions. He drew painstakingly realistic renderings of plaster casts and, later, the human body. He mastered the art of a bygone age. By the time he left, the revolution at the school had taken place and he was catapulted from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, from mimetic to concept art.

Straddling centuries, leaping from one era to another - like the images of childhood, these are the habits of adulthood. MacKay has jumped vast distances in his personal and professional life - from artist (he has a national reputation spanning over two decades) to administrator (he has been director of five art galleries and an artist-run centre); from Canada to Europe (he lived and worked in Beme, Switzerland for five years). The suddenness and unpredictability of his moves has something to do with the sense of brinkmanship in his work. He seems to need to challenge the limits of both materials and images. And yet, in his inventiveness and seemingly postmodernist deconstructions, appropriations and questionings of art museum values, there is a solid, almost old-fashioned concern with the traditional, validated work of western painting and drawing.

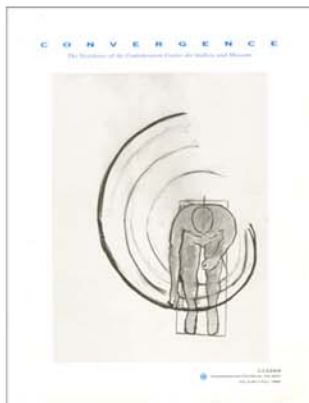
Even the use of photography to project the images from which he constructs his drawings and paintings has the same abruptness as its base. The flash moment of the photograph pulls the subject out of the continuum of his or her life and seals that life in one tiny visual package. MacKay takes that "glance" that has fixed the subject for all time and opens it up again, giving it a new continuity of visual thought. Outlines, overlayings, paint, wax, words - the murdered moment (Sontag refers to photography as "soft murder") is transformed into a new continuum. Always there's returning.

The foot and hand images in the large drawings MacKay did in Charlottetown are sometimes referred to by the artist as "portraits". Initially, the claim seems exaggerated for these dumb appendages that we use and misuse for work and play. And yet, the foot and hand are not as adept as the visage at deceiving us and concealing the reality of a person's life. The drawings and paintings are also witness to the strange fascination of western art with fragments and truncations. It seems to be a tradition based on more than the accidental damage of classical statuary and its reconstitution in the imagination and in reproduction. The western focus on the detail and the specialized fragment of knowledge belies a deep belief that if the details are studied, the whole can be reconstructed and known. The detail and the fragment become the source of knowledge. These fragments of the human body or statue are true monuments and, perhaps MacKay is saying, should be presented monumentally. The jump from academic drawings to photographs to monumental foot portraits is not as far or unpredictable as it at first may appear.

If anything, the dominant theme of MacKay's work is not rejection of the old, whether modernist or academic, but the need continually to return. He reworks old objects, books, reproductions, photographs, continually covering them up and revealing them, but always giving them a new life. His return to the island where he was a child is only one returning which is at the heart of all his work.

*Terrence Heath*





## ALLAN HARDING MACKAY: NEW ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

From September 13 to November 15, the artist-in-residence position will be filled by Allan Harding MacKay of Toronto, a former Islander, who recently served as Director, The Power Plant, Harbourfront, Toronto, and has exhibited for over twenty years across Canada. We look forward to presenting the creative process of MacKay's visual expression in the exhibition *Five Families and Other Works, 1985-1992*.

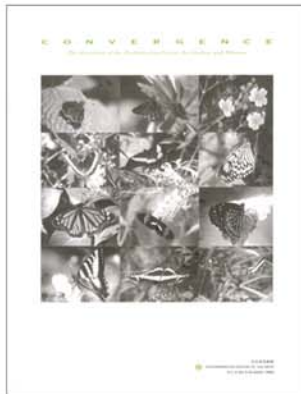
The CCAG&M plans to provide a studio facility to a contemporary artist of national reputation each fall to facilitate artistic practice, recognizing that the support of independent contemporary studio practice is a significant program in and of itself. However, the residency may include institutional or community-related activities. The artist-in-residence programme will remind us that the work of our artists provides the *raison d'être* of CCAG&M programmes.



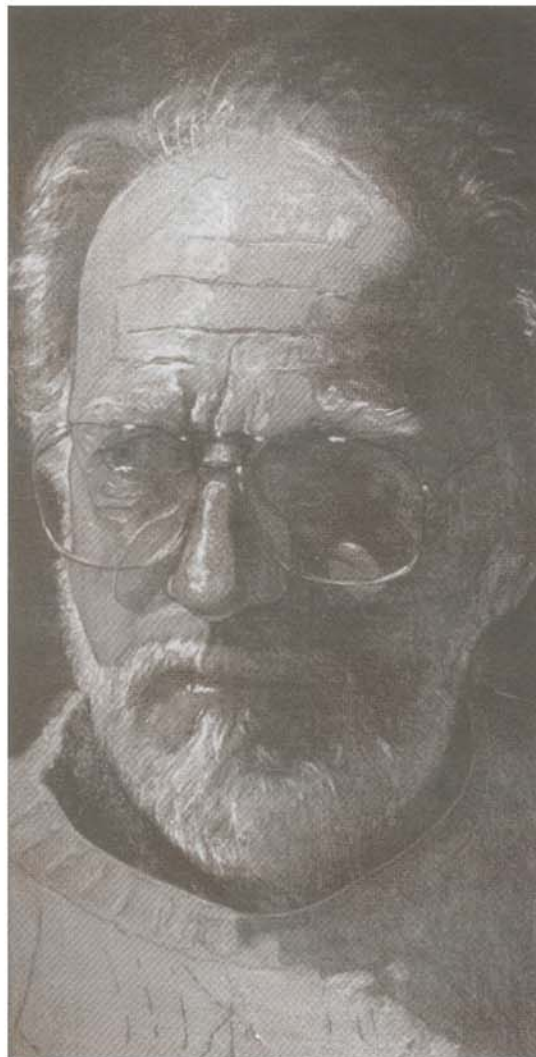
*Allan Harding MacKay*  
1992 artist-in-residence



## RECENT ACQUISITIONS:



The Gallery has also received two major donations from Toronto painter Allan Harding MacKay and Regina painter David Thauberger. *Portrait of a Brother* (19 92) by MacKay and *The Chappell Picture* (1993) by Thauberger mark the initiation and completion of successful artist residencies this past year. MacKay's sensitive portrayal of his brother extends the encyclopedic representation of his work in the collection, and Thauberger's 1993 work updates and contextualizes an earlier 1981 canvas and commemorates and celebrates the arresting architecture of a double house erected in 1892, designed by Chappell and Phillips for merchant P.P. Gillis on historic Great George Street. Contemporary artists such as MacKay and Thauberger inspire a renewed sensibility for the shifting and changing Island environment surrounding and affecting our lives.



*Portrait of a Brother* by Allan Harding MacKay,  
pastel and wax on paper-faced plywood, 243.7 x 121.7 cm.,  
drawn in 1992.