

The mountains beckon, Art Gallery curator says

With Allan MacKay returning to Alberta, Crystal Mowry becomes new curator

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It's a changing of the curatorial guard at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

Allan MacKay, the gallery's collections and curatorial consultant since 2001, is leaving to devote full time to his art practice.

He's returning to rural Alberta -- Canmore, to be specific.

Meanwhile, Crystal Mowry, the gallery's assistant curator for the past four years, has been named curator of exhibitions and collections.

The administrative switch takes effect today.

The gallery made significant progress under MacKay's curatorial stewardship.

For example, annual support from the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council increased to \$187,000 from a paltry \$17,500.

He played a major role in re-imagining the gallery's programming, with an emphasis on the strongest art practiced by artists living and working in Waterloo Region as reflected in such exhibitions as the Studio Alert and River Grand series, Variations on the Picturesque, Parochial Views and Kitchener-Waterloo Collects, not to mention the introduction of a regional biennial.

Although Waterloo Region had not been on his artistic radar before coming here, he was not surprised to find "serious artists working with practices worthy of note," MacKay confirmed.

MacKay supports the notion that public art institutions are "brokers between artists and the community."

In retrospect, he's pleased the gallery organized a national tour of work by Will Gorlitz. But he's disappointed the gallery didn't have the resources to organize a travelling exhibition for former University of Waterloo fine arts professor Art Green.

MacKay didn't spend all his time couped up in the gallery.

He maintained a busy art practice, including a trip to Afghanistan under the auspices of the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Program.

He also completed a number of public commissions, both locally and elsewhere.

In 2006, he unveiled a \$1.8-million Veterans' Memorial at Queen's Park. He was also commissioned to do a series of digital works for Toronto's Pape subway station.

Locally, a series of digital works adorn the Activa Sportsplex and he's working on a sculptural installation for downtown Kitchener's Speaker's Corner.

He also had exhibitions at Render at the University of Waterloo and Robert Langen Art Gallery at Wilfrid Laurier University. An exhibition of landscapes is scheduled for September at Harbinger Gallery.

"I was active in the studio," he acknowledges. "I achieved a good balance between gallery work and studio practice. It was a very enriching experience."

When asked why he's going back to Alberta, MacKay replies simply: "Everything has its time. The appeal of returning to the mountains made sense."

MacKay enthusiastically endorses Mowry's appointment.

"Crystal is a great bridge. She's been here a few years and she has knowledge about gallery programs and the community."

A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design, with a graduate degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Mowry came to the gallery in 2005 as a curatorial assistant. She was appointed assistant curator in 2006.

The Scarborough native has curated a number of exhibitions since coming here, including Kelly Richardson's Forest Park, Janet Morton's Better Homes and Gardens and Adriana Kuiper's Over-neath.

She agrees with MacKay's idea of galleries acting as brokers between artists and the community.

"We provide contexts within which to view the creation of art."

Mowry cut her curatorial teeth working in artist-run projects and galleries in Toronto.

"We didn't think about the public, the public was secondary," she recalls. "I've readjusted my focus and now think about art making in a different way. It's been an exciting challenge."

She didn't expect to curate when she came to the gallery, but MacKay quickly got her involved in developing projects and exhibitions.

"He was so generous. He encouraged me to pursue projects."

Mowry plans to maintain "the excellent relationship with artists in the region (MacKay) developed."

Like MacKay, she is also a practising artist. Her installation Twilight of an Empire, inspired by historical accounts of a Congolese pygmy who was abducted from his homeland and displayed at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, was recently presented by Render.

"My work is project-based in response to stimuli, so I hope I'll have the opportunity to develop projects in conjunction with my gallery work."

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