

Art Forum
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REVIEWS

ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

UNIVERSITY of TORONTO

Allan Harding MacKay situated his recent installation, *Source/Derivations II*, 1992, within the historical framework of Canadian painting, examining the relationship between depicted nature and real experience. MacKay has based 35 variations on one primary source, a widely reproduced painting by Lawren Harris, created around 1930. This exercise attempts to sever ties with the landscape painting tradition, presenting instead a facsimile of nature for our investigation.

Harding's enterprise begins with *Isolation Peak*, one of Harris' most popular works, a classic scene of a single mountain peak selected from the gallery collection. American culture has enshrined the Hudson River School; the Canadian equivalent is the Group of Seven, to which Harris belonged. Harris' is a utopian vision that arranges space hierarchically, placing the mountaintop at the apex of the composition. MacKay has capitalized on Harris' clichéd notions of idealized beauty-singular, noble, and majestic-using these as the starting point for his investigation.

The original Harris painting is hung in a prominent position within the installation; in front of it is placed the "*Viewing Device for the Perfect Mountain*," a contraption that secures a specific view of the peak through its modest-size triangular hole. Once established, this triangle acts as a reference point throughout the installation; the symbol represents a mountain, while simultaneously serving as a pure abstract form.

In addition to the Harris painting and the "*Viewing Device*," the installation includes seven near-scale painted panels that mimic the stages of painterly development in the Harris canvas: 21 artist's "sketches" made with tracing paper, wax, and photocopies of the images in the original painting; seven heavily waxed book-works originating from museum catalogues; and a wax facsimile of the museum's curatorial file on the original painting. As part of his conceptual project, MacKay traveled to the Rocky Mountains in search of Harris' *Isolation Peak*. Although he was never able to find the exact prototype, the documentation that he returned with suggests the mediation between artist and nature.

Here MacKay is treating nature as a construct, dissecting its parts through the many layers of paraffin, wax, and varnish that cover the tracing paper of his studies. Just as the early topographers fabricated an understanding of nature

through measurements and mathematical formulas, MacKay is processing Harris' depiction of *Isolation Peak*-cutting and folding back the same triangular shape used in the "Viewing Device"-to reveal color as well as black and white photocopies of the mountain.

MacKay acknowledges that, for Canadians, the experience of their country's idealized wilderness is necessarily mediated. Here he reinvents the landscape tradition, examining the mystique of nature and forming a bridge between our cultural past and present environmental realities. Though an authentic experience of nature is unretrievable, we are able to rearrange our detached experiences of it in whatever form we wish.

Linda Genereux