



Five Families: An Exhibition of Family Portraits By Allan Harding MacKay

Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum,
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Five Families, seen for the first time, came as a complete surprise, though I recognized the self-portrait, I had fallen into the trap of typecasting Alan MacKay as an art administrator and curator. ~ I had not thought of him as an artist until that moment. From time to time, so many of us are easily judged in the same way. I know how it is to gain the privilege of being able to work at one's own art. Artists so often hide, chameleon-like, in anticratic positions or in teaching. MacKay worked his way through the CBC, Louisburg, Centennial Gallery, the Anna Leonowens, Lethbridge and Saskatoon galleries. We crossed paths from time to time.

You have to like people and the family to do portraits. My own attitude has been, "You look at people all day, why would you want to do a picture of them?" Why indeed? does the world need another painted portrait when we have Kodachrome?

Much of the answer lies in the kinship factor, living on a small island where family, friends and who you vote for matter. People would have to be the main focus of an artist growing up here. There is no natural landscape or even a respectable view of the sea, sheltered as we are in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. You have to leave a place and its people to see it clearly. Living as he does in Switzerland, MacKay can look back on his roots and those who grew up with and around him.

MacKay's paintings give us a large-screen view of family and friends, including cats and birds in a "peaceable kingdom" attitude. The combination of painting and pastel drawing is so well-handled in these candid "snapshot" slice-of-life images on brown paper, showing people smiling, laughing and talking on the phone. People mug as they do for the camera.

Photography does have an important role here and there's no attempt to hide the fact that the images are projected, an acceptable technique since Roy Lichtenstein painted *What, You Found Out About My Image Projector!* Artists have been using photos since the days of the camera obscura. This is the larger-than-life family album as it should be, not as most albums really are. The arrangement of the composition and design of these portraits is as distant from that of the average snapshot as is the scale; these works about 5 by 12 ft., nor do they resemble the passport photos, with deadpan close-ups, of Chuck Close, and other New Realists like Robert Bechtle.

Being one who can seldom remember a name or place a face, the personality and character of each subject is of little interest to me personally, since I generally divide the entire world into people who wear glasses and those who don't, as far as visual appearance goes. The humanistic qualities that others read in faces are wasted on me. These works are rich enough in the painterly virtues to invite an appreciation of the spattered, dripped Expressionistic use of pigment in a controlled presentation.

No rigid little dots and tight, tiny brushstrokes here. Calligraphic line and the chance-taking use of colour brings these works on paper to life. I feel that canvas, by its very nature, would have been too confining and precious a ground.

A few words about the catalogue: Bruce Ferguson provides an extensive biography. His essay provides some laborious reading for a twelve-page booklet, though it does cover, in detail, the development of Allan Harding MacKay as an artist. It is a highly perceptive view of the him.

Perhaps inside many gallery directors there is an artist trying to get out. Allan MacKay has busted loose from the eggshell of administration. From here on there's no turning back.

Karl MacKeeman



Allan MacKay, *Five Guys* "Juddie", "Preacher", "Lunker", "Jack", "Rick", 1985, oil and pastel on paper, 149 x 360.7 cm

Permanent Collection Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum.

Donated by Mr. and Mrs. Richard MacKay, Halifax.