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Allan Harding MacKay
“Coming back is in accord with keeping still”

Dawn Rae Downton

Do your own thing.
Do the *right thing*.

The first, a familiar tribal chant from the late '60s; the second, American film director Spike Lee's ironic remonstrance on the late '80s state of siege in racial New York, in this year's film of the same name. From cant to can't: in twenty years we've come a long way, but have we come in the right direction?

It's a question that might concern Charlottetown native Allan Harding MacKay, a painter and installation artist whose work seldom seems to do the right thing-what is acceptable conceptually and aesthetically, and what is politically correct-or to do it at the right time. His latest exhibit, last winter at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, was *Some Critical Countenances*, a 545-ft-long roll, on industrial wrapping paper, of portraits of movers and shakers in the Canadian contemporary art world (see *ArtsAtlantic* 35, "Exhibitions", pp. 6-7).

Portraits? Typical of MacKay's work, in that it was huge, ostentatious, and representational, making no apologies for or explanation of itself (outside of a long catalogue essay contributed by Halifax art critic and anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault), it was also completely atypical of anything else making the scene in contemporary art. It's as if MacKay, who talks about not denying his innate artistic inclinations for portraiture, landscape, and decoration anymore, has shucked off years of conceptualist inculcation at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where he trained, and was director of the Leonowens Gallery for five years in the 70s, before he went on to direct the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, and then Saskatoon's Mendel Gallery. It's as if he's thumbed his nose (the nose that gets painted-huge, mottled, and mountainous-in his self-portraits) at the art school and the Canadian contemporary gallery scene as an arbiter of *au courant* taste. What, then, is he doing, recently appointed director of the tony Harbourfront Power Plant gallery in Toronto, whence he came from Toronto's Art Metropole, a contemporary art archive; and what is he doing painting pictures of the 'critical' players of the Canadian art world?

If MacKay is full of fine, funny contradictions, his audience and critics can miss them. Many noted how good the portraiture was, how accomplished the draughtsmanship but technique holds a poor candle to truth in the art world these days, and more than by any

other reaction, *Some Critical Countenances* was met with uneasiness at best, distrust at worst, and cynicism somewhere in between. Suspicion fixed on its content; few conceded that, since so little else is allowed a painter these days, subject might automatically be granted him.

MacKay was derided not only for who was in, among the work's hundred and some faces, but for who was out (Peggy Gale but not Elke Town? Garry Kennedy four times? MacKay himself, with a blinkered eye and without his hair?) The bigger objection still was intent: Was MacKay darkening the doors of the exhibit halls where so few can slip in these days, pandering both to his audience and his subjects, or, conversely, parodying them? No one could quite decide which it was, and which was worse, but few questioned how, or that, they knew what MacKay was all about.

Does the artist himself know? *Globe and Mail* art critic John Bentley Mays doesn't think so, having written the catalogue, *A Book of Not Knowing When We Are Going To Die Or Grow Up And Of Only Knowing A Little Bit*, to accompany a MacKay installation at Lethbridge in 1982. The title came from MacKay's daughter, then six. At 44 now, MacKay himself considers his sources and motivations with painstaking deliberateness; his answers are slow, circular, tautological, and frequently unfinished. As Townsend-Gault puts it, "When MacKay talks, it's as if he erases half of what he says." As often as not he'll say such and such a project or series, such and such a style, was what interested him then, was what he was doing at the time. Townsend-Gault suggests that he began *Some Critical Countenances* "just for the hell of it".

MacKay is an artist sure about serendipity, who stumbles upon things which interest him, appropriating old details to discover new and, as it turns out, not-so-new ideas. Some wisdom from the *I Ching*, that "coming back is in accord with keeping still," graced the catalogue of *Five Families*, a 1986 show in P.E.I. of portraits of Charlottetown buddies he'd grown up with, and all the families they'd grown into. "My work is less about appropriation and more about an acknowledgement of a tradition I think I'm part of," he says. "I have a working method of what, s gone before."

Nothing of MacKay's work is derivative, but most is derived. A series of domestic interiors superimposed with weird or cartooned shapes, human and feline, struggling and coupling, was displayed in 1988 at Toronto's Grünwald & Watterson Gallery. It grew out of MacKay's fascination with mail-order catalogues of glamorously furnished living rooms and bathrooms, idealized by the way they'd been lit and photographed; and then with an old book of outdated martial arts moves which gave him the choreography for his ghostly figures. Mounted at the Grünwald with the *Domestic Incidents* series, a set of still lifes of flowers was based on Manet's own last still lifes, seeking, as did Manet's, not to change but to reproduce the world with objective, distanced, formal perfection. But MacKay sabotages the limpid, placid decorativeness of these pictures with truculent, nonsequitur text. *Aggregation of Misery* underscores one arrangement, *Witness to a Panicky Scramble for Liquidity* another, and *Resist Takeover* still another, which is also headed with the inscription "*Amasse, Accumulate, Aquire*" [sic]. *Engage The Enemy On All Sides* has a vase of flowers bordered 'round with the text "DELINQUENTLOAN

DELINQUENTLOAN DELINQUENTLOAN....

Even in the midst of jokes, something struggles in most of MacKay's work, usually against a serene backdrop symbolic by its nostalgic unavailability. Even for the man who's fond of saying his five-year sojourn to Switzerland from 1983 to 1988 (where he rejoined his estranged Swiss wife and their daughter) was to manage the Oliver North account, the struggle is not simply, if it is ever, against the crush of materialism on art and every other good thing. The constant push and pull in MacKay's work has led John Bentley Mays to write about MacKay's "melancholy", his free borrowing and revamping of "the *fin de siècle* styles that attempted to portray liberated subjectivity - Art Nouveau, Symbolism (especially the art of Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler)-producing pictures that embody his own fascination with excess, uncertainty and sensual longing."

Says MacKay, "the issue of what's ideal and what isn't is a constant in my work." Text appears on most of his paintings (the *Critical Countenances* are all named underneath, and some are talking heads), sometimes as titles in counterpoint, sometimes so that his drawings can comment on themselves, humorously and/or anxiously, and sometimes, almost perversely, so that he invites criticism. On a large portrait of his daughter he wrote that his wife would object to the text; she did just that. He wrote a great deal as a child and as an art student in Halifax, and still dabbles in making audio tapes of "singing, gibberish, and silence". He may suppose the ideal can be approached through words as well as images, that the supreme approach is a combination of the two. In 1988 he had work in a Montreal group show called *Scripta manent*, full of Canadian painting that includes text. "Verba volent, scripta manent," the premise went: the spoken word is fleeting, the written word endures.

As is its way, the ideal comes packing its dark side-transience and loss. MacKay mentions "a whole series I went through of doing perfect mountains, or whatever." The mountains he saw for the first time during his stint in Lethbridge, and in Europe he grew entranced with the Alps of Switzerland-and of the early modernist Ferdinand Hodler. Like MacKay, Hodler's forte was twofold: monumental landscapes (of mountains) and portraits (many, like MacKay's, of himself). But "there were a whole bunch of mountain references that happened before I ever lived in the mountains," says MacKay, for whom life in the Alps began as a startling *déjà vu*, "a sublime physical experience". He was instantly home on the mountain range because of its landscape equivalents for his own emotional range. The whole environment there was a physical manifestation of an internal landscape that I'd always felt something about-the atmosphere, the construction of the mountains, the mists that notion of mystical and misty landscapes. It was what I was attracted to first in Nova Scotia-the fogs, the way fogs hang in there, the action of moisture and land, all that happens with- that. Switzerland reaffirmed a figurative and landscape tradition. I stopped denying it.

Series painted in and after Switzerland (one is titled *There Are No Perfect Mountains*) loom with huge, majestic mountains foregrounded by the ghostly figures of geometric, sketchy pyramids-perfect mountains-behind them.

In the portraits of Hodler, MacKay appears in the background, sketched-in tenuously, in

shadow, as often as not, looking over his shoulder-at history, tradition, his own life-retrospectively, quizzically or, more often, anxiously. (It's a pose he'd struck before, in the *Five Families* portraits.) "The pun," says the master punster of painting and language, "was to get in the picture with a master painter." MacKay continues to be absorbed, sometimes literally like this, with tradition. An inventory of elements of *Source/ Derivations*, a show mounted this past spring at the Ottawa School of Art, reads like a National Gallery curator's laundry list:

1. A pastel and oil on paper landscape based on Tom Thomson's 1915 painting, *Northern River*, from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, symetricized and rotated.
2. A pastel and oil on paper portrait of Dennis Reid.
3. A pastel and oil on paper portrait of Charles Hill.
4. A waxed copy of *The Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 1973, by Dennis Reid.
5. A waxed facsimile of the curatorial file relating to Tom Thomson's *Northern River*, from the archives of the National Gallery of Canada.
6. A waxed, mounted postcard reproduction of Tom Thomson's *Northern River*

The show was born of the same personal interests that produced *Some Critical Countenances*: "It all has to do with my own references," says MacKay. Reid and Hill were the curators involved when he-came to *Northern River*, and the book and curatorial file are used as armatures, waxed over and sealed or frozen at points relevant to MacKay's experiences of the Thomson painting. "It's an extrapolation," he says; "how out of one particular source come all these derivations, showing one's own cosmology of connections." And so MacKay slips in the side door of time and space, into a greater, timeless, and so ideal context-the confluence of art history and tradition.

For all his fascination with timeless ideals, MacKay runs merrily with another amazing paradox-of the dim archival prospects of the work he produces. A willing saboteur to his own business, both as artist and curator, he has worked "forever" with the same cheap, profuse, and readily-available materials-oils and pastels on huge rolls of industrial wrapping paper. The artist has the curator in him on the run within "a duality I have professionally," he explains. "As a curator I was very aware of the optimum conditions that could achieve the care and preservation of works for posterity. It's real different when you're a working artist with another sense of the materials and their necessity. These take precedence then; I could work for hours without having to worry about costs." It's helped make him prolific, and free to do what he wants-sketches, , drafts,' something formal-without any one taking precedence over another.

The Island schoolboy who used to paint on cardboard, book covers, school manila paper, has "particular views on the over-emphasis on conservation in this country. There's an edge to the conservational mentality which can override artistic and curatorial decisions." There's a natural attrition to consider and respect, he says: Some things should last, and the experience of others should be sufficient for the moment. That resources go into

maintaining something which most people can't experience anyway can be absurd. I want to counteract all of that; I'm more interested in certain ingredients and forces that can happen to the work which can enhance the aesthetic viewing but don't enhance the longevity.

As if to underline the point with a typical MacKay joke that should finally please the 'deconstructionists' of the savvy art world, the artist has now shredded all 545 ft. of *Some Critical Countenances*. Those (himself among them) who suspected the work would have only its single Halifax showing were right; only the tatters of the piece remain. Still, MacKay will 'show' it again in Toronto, stuffed into some kind of container, with only the catalogue (containing a running photograph of the piece above Townsend-Gault's essay) intact beside it. This script, too, shall eventually pass; it's the joke of the moment, the last laugh, which truly endures.

Though his version of it can be extreme and bizarre, it's not a new artist's ploy, this killing time with craft and coursing, careering (de)construction: "Though we cannot make our sun/ Stand still, yet we will make him run," said the Elizabethan poet Andrew Marvell "To His Coy Mistress". In this sense, Allan MacKay, painting himself into history with the vengeance and the whimsy of the damned, has all the time in the world. Departed from currency and obsessed with time, he paints what he wants when he wants, all the way back to the role models of Manet and Hodler and Tom Thomson and the Charlottetown gang with whom he grew up, all the way (and widely, all 545 filleted feet of it) into the roll model of his shredded present with the *Critical Countenances* of his working world in Canadian art. That's what makes sense to him, he says, and he knows he's done the right thing.

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Captions:

Allan Harding MacKay, Double Self-Portrait, 1984, oil & pastel on paper, 149.5 x 206.5 cm. Permanent Collection Confederation Centre Art Gallery & Museum. Photo: Barrett & MacKay

Above Allan Harding MacKay, Aggregation of Misery, 1987, pastel & oil on paper, 160 x 124.5 cm. Private Collection: Marshall Webb. Photo courtesy the artist.

Right Allan Harding MacKay, Domestic Incident #2, 1987, pastel & oil on paper, 150 x 155 cm. Photo courtesy the artist.