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Wisdom from an artist reborn

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

Allan MacKay: Mountain My Yes and other Densities, an installation, at Mercer Union, 333 Adelaide St. W, 5th floor, to Saturday.

Three years ago, Allan MacKay, the popular and successful director of Saskatoon's Mendel Art Gallery, abruptly resigned and moved his whole kit and kaboodle to a village in Switzerland, where he set up shop as an artist. This attractive gathering of painting, sculpture and sound-work is MacKay's first Toronto show since his departure.

Like most installation artists, MacKay provides the ingredients and leaves it up to us to bake the cake.

The elements include a rapidly drawn portrait of the artist at a piano, a large, sublimely romantic oil/pastel panorama of the Alps at dawn, and another brooding painting of mountains with a text on it about Mohammed and the mountain and moving. A copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* has been slathered in wax and turned into a sculpture - the show's title is a line from the novel, run backward - and an audio collage composed of MacKay's hauntingly beautiful half-singing, half-speaking, and found-sound by other people, plays softly in the gallery.

Like the improvised audio tapes, which MacKay has been putting together for years, this installation is an inventory of a moment in time. We find the ex-director, who finished art school 15 years ago, rediscovering the clutter and sensuous beauty of paint, picking up bits done long ago, trying new tactics and, above all, learning all over again to face blank paper in a blank studio, set in a spectacular landscape, a burned-bridge's distance from Memorandumland.

Mountain My Yes contains much wisdom about the artist's work, and about that funny, hard, mid-life moment when you finally decide what you love, want and are - and do something about it.

Caption:

Self-portrait by Allan MacKay