

The Globe and Mail
Toronto, Ontario
January 1986

Excerpt from
A visual and intellectual delight

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

A. Harding MacKay's. Recent paintings on paper and canvas, at the Grünwald Gallery (80 Spadina Ave.), to Jan. 17.

For his debut in a Toronto commercial gallery, this former director of Saskatoon's Mendel Art Gallery has provided a rich, quirky heap of recent pictures, filling room to overflowing. These sumptuously painted works embody MacKay's latest encounters with his ongoing interests - or obsessions. These include himself, and the new life he's making for himself in Switzerland; the writings of Joyce, Eliot and other modernists; and the monumental, metaphysical painting of the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918).

To all these personal and art-historical topics, MacKay brings a somewhat wacky, self-effacing sense of humor - a North American's self-protection, perhaps, against the weighty solemnity of European high culture. One ' work, for instance, features a majestic mountain rising into a Hodlerian mystical sky of burnished greens and reds and inky blues, only to be whittled down to size by the warning in its title: *There are No Perfect Mountains* (1986).

Such humor is left out of the show's marvellous centrepiece, whose three beautiful panels, all done in 1986, are titled *Presence*, *Betwixt and Between*, and *Absence*.

On the flanking panels, MacKay's Swiss wife Irene reclines nude in a symbolist sea of phantom water, enacting poses intended to communicate the "presence" and "absence" of the title. In the centre panel, these poses are repeated, rhyminly; and in turn they frame a central, expansive self-portrait of MacKay, inscribed as a fabric of open-worked lines on a text by T. S. Eliot. This suite of related images is a triumphant self-portrayal of the artist as mountain, at home at last among the loved ones and the other mountains of his adopted country.