

The Globe and Mail
March 18, 1988
Toronto, Ontario

Sensual paintings recall twilight of the Romantics

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

One of the sunniest bits of news to come out of the Toronto art scene recently was this week's announcement that Allan MacKay has been named director of Art Metropole, effective May 1.

Running Art Metropole - bookstore, gallery of printed art, archive of the Canadian and international avant-garde - is a complicated job, requiring both administrative know-how and inside knowledge of the artist's work. MacKay showed the art world he knew how to run things during his distinguished years as director/ curator of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. His true coming of age as an artist, however, has taken place since he left the Mendel a few years ago, moved to a village in Switzerland and started painting and drawing up a storm.

His current show at Toronto's Grünwald & Watterson gallery (80 Spadina Ave., to March 23) is a harvest of recent Swiss work, and proof that pushing pencils is not necessarily an obstacle to pushing paint quite beautifully.

In these large pieces on heavy industrial paper, MacKay continues his evocation in pastel and oil of late-Romantic twilight moods and longings, this time in private homes. His lines do not forthrightly describe plush living rooms of ruffled beds; instead, they suggest the smoky atmosphere of overstuffed luxury, a rather empty eroticism. His dry interior colors are not clear; they smolder autumnally, in a decorative range across plum and russet and lemon yellow, giving off a scent of ambiguous comforts - secure ones, but ones that have gone soft, decadent. Yet into each domestic interior here, MacKay has inserted sex and fights, reminders of what intimate life involves, plush or no plush.

Despite all the handsome paintwork expended on these domestic scenes, the melodramatic moment in each seems to make the whole painting a cartoon, on the order of some of Eric Fischl's less convincing tableaux. But MacKay's creative heart has always lain elsewhere - not in such U.S.-style reporting on the banality and tension of upscale life, but in a more subjective, melancholy study of passionate NW. He freely borrows and revamps the *fin-de-siecle* 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.

The manifesto of MacKay's relation to that brew is the huge painting called *A Limited Tradition of Authorized Hyperbole* (1987). A vast wave, breaking and spattering across the painting's 26-foot length, is a summons to renounce the stranglehold of anxiety by renouncing language and civilized life, and plunging into an ocean of irrational delights.

The painting is not an entirely serious prescription; Romantic abandon and hyperbole (authorized or not) are no more answers to the stress of modern life than luxury is. But MacKay's expansive, operatic painting is a beautiful re-serving of the late-Romantic medicine as we're likely to see this season, and an extraordinary painting as well.

Caption:

A detail from Allan MacKay's *Domestic Incident #5*: smoky, decadent atmosphere.