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The Arts
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Taking a peep at a perfect icon

Allan MacKay is better known in Toronto as a gallery director (of the Power Plant, at Harbourfront) than as an artist and - to judge from a current show - even when the artist takes the upper hand, academic and curatorial issues remain central to him.

For his show that opened this week at the Justina Barnicke Gallery in the University of Toronto's Hart House, MacKay takes as his starting point Lawren Harris's famous *Isolation Peak* and builds around it an installation that comments on the power of that triangular icon in the Canadian consciousness. The installation - *Source/Derivations II* - represents the second in a series: MacKay first used this approach at the Ottawa School of Art with Tom Thomson's *Northern River* as his inspiration.

The first element of this new installation is the original painting itself - it is part of the Hart House collection hanging on the first wall as you enter the gallery. MacKay has created a viewer - "*Viewing Device for Perfect Mountain*" - through which we can peer, highlighting the perfect triangular form of *Isolation Peak* by framing it with a triangular peep hole.

Across from the original sits a series of copies of the painting in various stages of completion, various colours and various media. And around the room are displayed multiple smaller works in which photographic images of the painting or of catalogues about the painting are hidden underneath layers of wax or tracing paper. These are the most technically engaging works in the show, where the image of the mountain occasionally peeps forth from a triangular hole gouged through thick layers of paper from under a flimsy triangular flap.

At some levels the installation is a curatorial exercise, for its first impact on most viewers will be to make them re-examine a famous and familiar historical work. By literally covering *Isolation Peak* in layers of wax and paper, MacKay forces us to peel back the layers that cover the image of the famous mountain in our mind's eye.

But at a more challenging level, the installation is not just about *Isolation Peak*, but also about the relationship between artist and subject, and the toll history takes on imagery. *Isolation Peak* was an idealized image of the perfect mountain - a single icy pyramid reaching toward the heavens from an undulating base of foothills - inspired by Isolated Peak in British Columbia's Yoho National Park. MacKay (who visited the site, retracing Harris's journey to the Rockies) takes this process of distancing the art from the original one step further, revealing in his installation how imagery is burdened with the heavy weight of repeated reproduction.

The Barnicke Gallery is also showing Hart House's recent acquisitions, a mixed bag of late modern art presided over by John Brown's strong *Human Head # 13*, a layered, scarred and wounded surface built up in oil and tempera from which one single black eye socket stares out.

In a more oblique but ultimately more satisfying way the painting of Carol Wainio addresses the issue that lies at the root of MacKay's examination of Lawren Harris - the seeming impossibility of creating new art in an image-saturated age. The single large painting currently showing at the S. L. Simpson Gallery is vintage Wainio. It is a large, predominantly grey, abstract ground on which rags have occasionally been pasted and painted over and which breaks out in small monochromatic spots of representational imagery, groups of buildings painstakingly painted in miniature or cartoonish human figures more briefly glimpsed. It is called *Listening Area*, the title, whatever its source, somehow suggesting that looking has become so impossible that, like the blind, we must prick up our ears to see. The paradox of Wainio's work is that in acknowledging the difficulty of creating new imagery it gives us much to look at.

Also included in this show, which opened yesterday, are two large wall sculptures by Judith Schwarz. These are a continuation of that striking series that combines cruciform or circular motifs in handsomely crafted wood with similar shapes in steel.

The female leg is perhaps our ultimate symbol of glamour, somehow conjuring up in its shapely form sex, beauty, youth and good living. It is that potent image of the fashion spread and liquor ad that Cathy Daley examines in a series of large drawings of legs at the Cold City Gallery. These huge legs, singly or in charcoal and rendered as though clothed in tights that delineate their forms. They are removed from any body and sometimes even displayed upside down, as Daley exposes the objectification of the female form that lies at the foundation of glamour.

Accompanying these drawings is a series of small works that draw parallels between that objectification and our treatment of animals. *Gut Reaction*, as this work is called, includes 36 small, well-executed paintings of various images (a teddy bear, a real stuffed bear, a female torso, a perfume bottle) with various words (feline, taxidermy, Obsession). While Daley's point is well taken (and best summed up in the image of the Playboy bunny which encompasses both the objectification and subjugation of women and the subjugation of the animal in one single logo), these small works make it heavy handed, relying largely on loaded language to hammer it home.

Ultimately, the giant legs are, both visually and intellectually a more powerful statement of the theme.

In the second space at Cold City, Ginette Legaré offers a series of small sculptural constructions of an utterly different sensibility. In these intelligent pieces Legaré's concern is her materials - primarily found objects, cleverly matched and manipulated to build the final works.

The Missing Blink, for example, attaches an oil can (of the small cylindrical type ending in a pointed nozzle and used to oil machinery) to a wall bracket of the type that might hold a gas lamp. This antique looking construction is covered in a canvas sleeve onto which is printed a photograph of the solid foot of some medieval statuary.

Similarly, *The Altering Eye* bends a metal grid (which, when clothed in rubber, would have been a doormat) into an undulating form. Above it is a large glass pendant inside a metal ring, featuring a photo of a hand, its image distorted by the curving surface of the pendant.

As the titles of both these works suggest, Legaré plays with our ways of seeing, tripping up our expectations about what these objects are and forcing us to look again. Furthermore, in frequently quoting from the human body (either directly or through statuary), Legaré speaks of sculpture's fundamental relation with the body. (Historically, the human form was the original subject of sculpture, and much contemporary sculpture reminds us of that reproductive role simply by existing as objects in the same space our bodies occupy.) It is to individual body parts that Legaré's works seem to refer, presenting us with these puzzling objects as alternatives to our hands, feet and eyes.

Caption:

Lawren Harris's *Isolation Peak* is seen through Allan MacKay's 'Viewing Dev