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City native remembers youth, friends in special portraits

By Keith McNeil

A Charlottetown native who left Prince Edward Island as a young man on the road to becoming a fulltime artist has returned home with an exhibition of family portraits paying tribute to his youth,

Allan Harding MacKay, who now lives and works in Bern, Switzerland, after holding a number of positions in art galleries across Canada, spent about eight months working on the series of portraits, entitled *Five Families*.

The exhibition officially opened at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum Thursday night and runs until June 1. The families portrayed in the exhibition attended the opening.

Mr. MacKay said in an interview Thursday the idea for the portraits came to him several years ago during a visit to Charlottetown. He met gallery curator Mark Holton and suggested doing a series of portraits of family and friends with connections to his Charlottetown years.

FIVE GUYS

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a portrait called *Five Guys: Juddie, Preacher, Lunker, Jack and Rick*. "Lunker" is Mr. MacKay, who is at the centre of the portrait, surrounded by his boyhood friends George "Juddie MacMillan, David "Preacher" Rowe, "Jack" Hynes and "Rick" Hancox.

The other works in the exhibition are portraits of the MacMillan, Rowe, Hynes and Hancox families, and a double self-portrait of the artist owned by the gallery.

All the works are chalk pastel and oil paint on paper. Mr. MacKay said his work, a combination of landscape and figurative, are "pretty restricted 'to that medium.

LEFT HOME AT 18

Born and raised in Charlottetown,

Mr. MacKay left home at 18 to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, returning home in the summer. Several years later, he moved off the Island permanently.

After graduation, he worked for the CBC as a scene painter - he painted the floors of the

set for Don Messer's Jubilee and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Resources as a designer.

He later served stints as assistant curator of the Centennial Art Gallery in Halifax, gallery director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, director of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge and director of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon before moving to Switzerland in 1983 as a full-time practising artist.

The *Five Families* portraits are all larger than life and as such, the features, are somewhat exaggerated. Bruce Ferguson of Montreal, in an essay describing the exhibition and the artist's work, terms the portraits "grotesque realism".

On first glance, these new portraits are not flattering ... but closer inspection releases to us not the attempt to be representations reproduced faithfully, but rather desires - strong desires for the lived experience of these bodies through time to be communicated," Mr. Ferguson said,

Gallery curator Mark Holton says the works appeal on both a visual and critical level.

"Visitors to this exhibition will discover that Allan MacKay's portraits, large in size and concept, have appeal for both our visual and critical faculties ... rooted in the Island, (his) portraits speak to our traditions as well as to his own," he says in a foreword to Mr. Ferguson's essay.

Mr. MacKay says he hopes the portraits will stay in Charlottetown as part of the gallery's collection. At present, there are no plans to take the exhibition elsewhere.

As for himself, Mr. MacKay plans to spend some time in Halifax and Toronto before returning to his Swiss home and his work.

The exhibition, co-ordinated by Mr. Holton, was organized by the Confederation Centre Gallery.

Caption:

ALLAN MACKAY, a Charlottetown native who now lives and works in) Bern, Switzerland, stands next to his portrait entitled *Five Guys: Juddie, Preacher, Lunker, Jack and Rick*: now being shown as part of an exhibition of family portraits at Confederation Centre Art Gallery.