

Vanguard  
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**Allan Harding MacKay**  
Eye Level Gallery  
Halifax  
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Allan MacKay has been using aleatorical methods for over ten years now. Earlier works showed him interested in the tangle of sense and nonsense, through which there seems to be no guide but chance. The mode was that of Gertrude Stein and John Cage. In this collection of new works on the theme of "*Beispiel/Example*," there is an important difference, perhaps not unrelated to the fact that MacKay now lives in Switzerland. This time, chance has given him a subject, and it is one of the great subjects - individual identity and the exercise of Power,

The work began when MacKay happened upon a dated, German nook, "about" dancing exercises. He was immediately struck by the image of a girl who, while presumably demonstrating some exercise designed to relax the shoulders and let the arms hang free, is slumped in a position of the most abject submission. But submission to what? For MacKay the answer was supplied by the fact that her image appeared to be dominated by a shadow, cast by an off camera male watcher/director/exemplar.

MacKay had registered just this much when he began to coat the volume in wax, a device often used in his earlier work, making all but this one image invisible, all but one word illegible. That word, the one that caught his eye on the page opposite and gave him his clue, was 'beispiel'. The closed book, no longer able to explain itself, gives the random image permission to speak for itself. That is to say, gives MacKay permission to make the image speak on his terms. He does this deconstruction in isolation in two ways: by copying the imagery of the page in such a way that a symmetrical order emerges, and by giving words to the images.

It could be said that MacKay has appropriated a quotation from the book and copied it. In doing so he has made visible the changes that come with the transmission of information, accounted for by the second law of thermodynamics, and much elaborated in recent critical theory, that are endemic in copying, appropriating, quoting, which mean that no message is ever received in quite the form that it is sent. It is in this way that the transformation of his found subject is effected, progressively through the series of paintings. As MacKay received this image of oppressor and oppressed he saw oppressed and oppressor, he saw double. This transformation is a variation on an old theme, but none the less valuable for that.

MacKay eschews a specifically "feminist" reading of this work, not being concerned with gender roles as such, but rather with the idea of opposing roles as a duality. The notion of double identity is fundamental to the modern idea of the self. MacKay schematises the idea,

using it to impose a pattern, an order, on the subject. Does this reduce the suffering represented and felt, or does it trivialise it? The answer given here seems to be that although to double is to compound, it is also to equalise. Symmetrical order equalises, corrects the imbalance of the very unequal.

The images, interchangeably male and female, and the words, interchangeably "he" and "she," taken together, set up an echo which is found amplified in the series of large paintings. These sombre works are done on heavy grade brown wrapping paper cut from the roll, the paint, browns, greys, black, scumbled and spattered and combined with oil pastel and chalk, dusty and encrusted like spoiled frescoes. Centred on the waxed book on its pedestal, open at the page which gave the original, the paintings fan out around the two rooms of the gallery.

The final note that is struck in the treatment of the dreary cliché of oppression and submission that MacKay has chanced upon, is one of humanitarian reconciliation. Each is one and each is the other, they are, as that other cliché has it, the same. It is not totally clear whether MacKay sees the roles as mutually interchangeable or whether he forces them to become so, but the result is a balance between the opposing forces "HE WAS SHE: SHE WAS HE" each an example to the other.

Such ambiguity is hardly a new solution but MacKay's work does give a new slant to the idea of problem painting. His problem, his subject, was acquired by methods that grow out of the same avant garde antecedents as the NSCAD conceptualism which once influenced him. But it is the problem, not the methods, that interests him. Not self-referring but universal. Or, looked &, in another way, this work is an intriguing amalgam of European, particularly German, metaphysics and North American pragmatism.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault

**Caption:**

Allan MacKay, from *Biespeil/Example* (1985)