



DO MAKE SAY THINK

Fighting Harper's Conservative government with art

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Do Make Say Think is the name of a Canadian rock band, but we also thought the title was a good one for a weekly summer series introducing readers to British Columbians out of the public eye who are doing things, making things, saying things and thinking things. This week, for Make, we interview artist Allan Harding MacKay.

Allan Harding MacKay has done two stints as a war artist for the Department of National Defence, travelling to Somalia in 1993 and Afghanistan in 2002. But these days he is waging his own battle – against the current federal government.

Mr. MacKay, who made headlines for destroying his own war art during a Parliament Hill protest in 2012, remains more concerned than ever about what he believes is a lack of transparency in Ottawa, the government's treatment of veterans and First Nations and its handling of environmental issues.

"The fight for democracy is on the home front," says Mr. MacKay, who has turned his thoughts about the Stephen Harper government into a two-part art project, now part of an exhibition in the Okanagan. "I think it's that dire."

Allan Harding MacKay: Gift of Conscience, which includes examples of Mr. MacKay's war art but also focuses on his protests against the actions of the Conservative government, is at the Penticton Art Gallery in conjunction with the gallery's main summer show *The Kabul Art Project: Contemporary Art From Afghanistan*.

"I think the majority of us know so little about what is actually going on," says gallery director/curator Paul Crawford, referring to the Canadian military, including its involvement in Afghanistan. "Everyone has an opinion on it because we've been told this is what we need to think or this is how it is. And it's a very different thing when you start looking at it all. So I think that has been a really eye-opening [exhibition] for a lot of people."

Mr. MacKay's trip to Somalia was a catalyst for his own eye-opening experience. He happened to be there when the incident that prompted the Somalia inquiry took place: the attempted suicide of a Canadian soldier who was arrested in the death of a 16-year-old Somali, who had been beaten and tortured.

"It awakened in me ... political instincts about okay, how does government function? What kind of relationship have they got with the military? What kind of power do they have over what happens with the military? And of course as we know, the military doesn't decide where to go. That's a political decision. We're not bombing Iraq because a general said, 'Well, I think we would go in and do something.' Basically there's a chain of command. All of that became interesting for me because it gave me some insight ... in terms of how foreign affairs is conducted, as it relates to the military," says Mr. MacKay from his home in Banff, Alta.

That, in addition to a trip to the Kandahar Airfield and environs at the invitation of the Canadian Forces Artists Program, sparked Mr. MacKay's interest in the political machinations in Ottawa. And the artist did not like what he was seeing.

"As a Canadian citizen I became really kind of alarmed at ... how things were being manipulated and how Parliament was being gamed ... the committee system in particular," says Mr. MacKay, who observed that committee meetings were increasingly being held in camera – meaning discussions and decisions were happening out of public view. "So I thought there we go; talk about the suppression of public process."

Other things about the federal government's actions were bothering him too – the treatment of veterans in particular, but also its actions (and lack of action) on the environment, and the treatment of First Nations. He felt the government viewed issues through an ideological lens and was too partisan in its actions.

"All of that was getting my goat basically and I thought what can I do as a citizen?" says Mr. MacKay, 71. And I thought, of course, I've got artwork that is part of Canada's military heritage."

For a two-part project he called *Speak Up Speak Out*, Mr. MacKay set aside five works, all part of his own collection, and in May of 2012 travelled by train from Toronto, where he was living at the time, to Ottawa and destroyed four of the works during his Parliament Hill protest. A fifth work was destroyed beforehand, live on CBC's *Power & Politics* at the request of the show, he says.

As a followup, Mr. MacKay created what he called *Gift of Conscience*. It was an artwork in multiples, some consisting of a yellow velvet glove with the word "conscience" embroidered in black text, boxed up with a fragment of the previously destroyed artwork tucked inside. (Some did not include the yellow glove for budgetary reasons, but a card with a picture of the glove and the text as well as a fragment of the artwork.) Mr. MacKay, who was living in Nelson, B.C. by then, sent more than 160 of these, all signed, to the Prime Minister, Conservative MPs, the Speaker of the House and the Conservative Leader of the Senate.

"To date, I have received zero acknowledgment," he says.

These days he's busy creating satirical political collages he calls his *Court Painter* series which he sends out to e-mail subscribers – depicting, for example, Mr. Harper and Justin Trudeau embracing to celebrate the passage of Bill C-51, while a disapproving Pierre Trudeau looks on.

Mr. MacKay is a self-described political junkie, but while he comes from a long line of PEI Liberals, he is not aligned with that – or any – party. ("I'm not a card-carrying Liberal but I believe in a liberal democracy.")

Now, with an election campaign under way, he feels the concerns that sparked his protest three years ago are as relevant as ever and should be considered ahead of a trip to the ballot box.

"The intention was to [tell] others this is what I've discovered about our government. You might not agree, but you have to be aware of some of the aspects."

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