

[unedited version]

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SOURCE/DERIVATIONS: ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

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Introduction

Vincent Varga

The Canadian experience is preoccupied with locating and defining an identity based on an understanding of place or locale. Northrop Frye, perhaps the quintessential Upper-Canadian literary philosopher, has noted that "Where is here?" not "Who am I" is the metaphysical, metaphorical and poetic conundrum for our nation. Of course, Frye's statement was never meant to raise only an issue of geography, but had a greater implication - that of mapping the larger construction of an identity - for the self, and by extension, for a nation. The continuing debate in and about Quebec is an example of how the complex nexus of place and identity is inseparable. This nation-defining riddle has provided impetus for generations of writers, performers and visual artists. This question washes over - wave after wave - and sometimes completely submerges our ever-evolving culture. It repeats again and again, like a mantra.

To Allan Harding MacKay, a visual artist who has lived and worked in Charlottetown, Halifax, Lethbridge, Saskatoon, Calgary, Bern, Switzerland, Toronto and Banff the search for personal definition manifests itself partly through an investigation of visual images produced by other artists that refer to our national heritage. His approach brings into question popular notions associated with modernism, such as the creative genius of the artist, originality, and the steady linear progression of history. He is also acutely aware of the way history has been constructed - there are aboriginal, British and French versions of the foundation of our country. MacKay is concerned with the question of whose history is being recorded, preserved and promoted. His investigation has touched on individuals associated with events of national significance, but he also considers events that have involved private individuals and their relation to history.

Through his layered working methodology, MacKay analyzes images which in some cases have been granted iconic status within the Canadian psyche and Canadian art = historical canon. By appropriating the "original," MacKay begins the process of uncovering the multiple layers of cultural and art-historical associations within an image, and thereby constructs an identity informed by the past which also resonates in personal experience. These works are consciously "derived from" and hint at or provide clues not only to the physical "source," but, through this process, to the fabricated or constructed nature of all images or histories, whether they be real or imagined. MacKay's investigation is grounded

in a profound appreciation of the veracity and power of the image, in its ability to engage with and encapsulate an essential quality of our time - and also, paradoxically, to transcend this mortal coil.

With all works of art, specific meaning is often elusive, yet we can appreciate that works can be simultaneously topical, poignant and poetic. Allan MacKay's interest in this country's images focuses understanding of the past and seeks to reconcile written history with representations of it (through art and cultural history), with perceptions of the past, with the role of cultural institutions like the Art Gallery of Windsor, and with the role of the artist within society.

Prior to *Source/Derivations III* at the Art Gallery of Windsor, MacKay produced two *Source/Derivations* installations, in each of which the artist worked within a conceptual framework whereby he selected a "source" work and then developed a series of derivations based on the "source."

Source/Derivations I was presented at the Ottawa School of Art in March 1989 and involved a number of works in a variety of forms and media inspired by Tom Thomson's 1915 canvas, *Northern River*, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

Source/Derivations 11 focused on Lawren Harris's *Isolation Peak* (ca. 1930), housed in the permanent collection of Hart House, at the University of Toronto. These works provided a direct means for MacKay to locate and make tangible his continuing interest in aesthetic simulation, the nature of "landscape" and our perception of "place," and the ways that memory mediates through a process of layering and erasure.

While building on the approach established in *Source/Derivations I* and *11*, the artist intended in *Source/Derivations III* to consider aspects of the AGW collection that reflected on the historical, and more specifically post-industrial, context of Windsor. For this project, MacKay selected *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid* (1975/76), a mixed-media work by the London, Ontario artist Ron Benner. MacKay's investigation represented a departure from his methodology in that, in *Source Derivations III*, he dealt with the work of a living artist. For MacKay, this project represented not only an exploration of an aspect of the AGW's collection, but (perhaps more significantly) an opportunity for respectful negotiation and dialogue with the artist Ron Benner. The work selected by MacKay was of deep personal significance to Benner, in that it was made to honour the memory of two fellow railway workers who had been killed in a derailment near Windsor.

Source/Derivations III served to initiate different dialogues between the artist and the gallery (representing institutional and cultural history), the artist and community, and the artist (MacKay) and the artist (Benner) - in a critical yet constructive manner. In this work, MacKay fused his interest in the process of

deconstructing histories, as embodied in visual images, with his interest in a constructed identity as seen through the genre of portraiture. In each case, we learn that representations and meaning are provisional, elusive, allusive and fleeting, never fixed, always predicated on history and experience, time and memory.

Two distinguished Canadian authors, Terrence Heath and Robert Stacey, were invited to write about MacKay's project. The intention in choosing these two writers was to challenge them to consider their past and present relationship to MacKay from a distanced position while acknowledging a personal interest in and affinity with the work. Similarly, the design of this book is an attempt to allude to the capacity of memory to remember, to recall, to plumb the depths of our past, to allow the sands of time gently to erode and to see how images can elicit not only emotions, but a sense of ourselves.

MacKay's methodology involves a form of cultural archaeology and filtering which positions the artist as an aesthetic facilitator or bridge between past and present, culture and nature, the real and the mythological. By focusing on aspects of the AGW collection, the project not only posed a re-interpretation of a work(s) in the collection, but in turn reflected on the significant historical role as exhibitor and interpreter of its holdings played by the gallery (and by other collecting institutions). This vital, interactive role provides a greater appreciation for locale, place, region and the construction of identity, whether it be personal or for a community.