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Allan HardingMacKay:
From Charlottetown to Mogadishu

Extension Gallery,
Print and Drawing Council of Canada,
Toronto

Just how far is it from Charlottetown to Mogadishu? About a bazillion miles and at least two artists' lifetimes away, if MacKay's two-part fall exhibition was the measure. Seemingly two separate exhibits, the wildly different sets of works occupying halves of the PDC Extension Gallery served as object lessons on the effect of place and mission on both an artist's style and technique.

The "Charlottetown" series, seven huge pastel drawings of feet and hands, speak of quiet studio hours spent contemplating the human form; they practically reek of privilege and indulgence. Little more than decorative studies wrought large, the series continues where MacKay's now famous portraits on brown paper left off - parodying the ideologies of permanence and tradition associated with portraiture and figure study by rendering the works on cheap, non-archival brown industrial paper. (Having been raked over the coals of the daily art columns in New Brunswick for using brown paper and newsprint as my media, I felt more than a little vindicated by MacKay's nonchalance.)

In an interesting counterpoint, MacKay's Armed Forces-sponsored "Somalia" series, a collection of photo-collages based on the artist's camera and video work in that country, and a bookwork entitled *Accumulation: Print*

Media Tome/Tomb, are both rendered in heavy varnishes and sealed in waxed paper. The collages are graphically violent and yet seem free of exploitative tactics; they are not sensational, merely accurate. The bookwork is comprised of long, thin layers of waxed pages in which media clippings and front-page photographs are lovingly (morbidly?) preserved, reminiscent of Tibetan prayer books. The book, which grew, each week of the exhibit, with new clippings, is to be sealed (embalmed?) in wax and damar. In both projects, the print/media immediacy of "war correspondence" is negated by the sealing and preserving processes.

MacKay's waxed cottages question the daily-update mentality that provides Canadians with information about Somalia, painfully reminding the viewer that each body-count clipping from a disposable newspaper actually represents real violence and real suffering. There is nothing abstract or temporal about the events in Somalia; only our so-called coverage of the events is fleeting.

By preserving the print media's fleeting attentions, and incorporating them with his own

sketches and cullings, MacKay asks the viewer to reorganize, if not overturn, his/her attention span, and reading practice, when regarding the differences between art and journalism. In the dialectic created by this display, capital W art, embodied by the figure studies, is merely a temporal amusement, a clever flexing of craft muscles; but the mundane actuality of violence (and, sealed in wax, the recording of violence) lasts generations.

From Charlottetown to Mogadishu challenges the tradition of war artistry - a tradition of quick sketches, fleeting glimpses, and incessant movement - by slowing down the reporting process, and perhaps the hit and run ideology, that informs our apathy.

R. M. VAUGHAN