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(FRED LUM/The Globe and Mail)

ART / As Canada's war artist in Somalia, Allan MacKay's mission was to observe the activities of Canadian peacekeeping troops and create a body of art based on the experience. Now back home in his Toronto studio, he is working on a series of large scale drawings

Portraits of the peacemakers

BY KATE TAYLOR
The Globe and Mail
Toronto

IT was in northern Somalia, in the area now controlled by Canadian forces, that artist Allan MacKay and his travelling companions came upon a strange scene. Under the waning crescent moon that marks the end of Ramadan, camels were being slaughtered for meat and the pounding sound of men breaking the massive bones alternated with the squeaking of bats. The meat was loaded onto a wheelbarrow to be taken off to market and a calf was lined up to be killed. As the butchers slit its throat, a woman came forward with a basin and collected the blood that spilled forth. She then approached her child and poured the contents of her basin over his head, bathing his slight body in blood and rubbing it into his skin.

This odd baptism — presumably some kind of folk remedy — was just one of many scenes that MacKay recorded using both video and still cameras during his recent two-week trip to Somalia. As Canada's war artist in the strife-torn east African country, his mission was to observe the activities of Canadian peacekeeping troops and create a body of art based on the experience. Now back home in his Toronto studio, he is working on a series of large scale portrait drawings from which the Department of National Defence will be free to take its pick.

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gest the experience," he said in an interview last week. "The way I try to move things out is through the drawings."

When MacKay made a trip to Charlottetown as a visiting artist recently, the sight of the cenotaph and an encounter with the curator of the war museum got him wondering if Canada still has a war artists program, a tradition dating back to the First World War. Coincidentally, when he phoned the defence department to inquire, he found it was currently seeking an artist to go to Somalia under the contemporary equivalent, a 25-year-old program that employs artists at home and abroad to record the activities of the Canadian Forces.

He travelled to Somalia on Canadian Forces planes — via Trenton, Lahar and Nairobi — as part of a group of reporters and photographers accompanied by a Forces public relations officer. The group spend almost two weeks in and around the town of Belet Huen, the area in northern Somalia allotted to Canada under an international peacekeeping plan.

The one sour note on the trip was the news that a Somali had died while in Canadian custody and an officer detained in connection with the death had attempted suicide — a story that has grabbed headlines ever since. It was when the group saw an ambulance draw up to the detention centre at the Canadian base at Belet Huen that they suspected something was amiss. MacKay says he doesn't think the story would ever have got back to Canada

if the journalists in his group had not seen the ambulance (which was removing the attempted suicide) and started asking questions.

"It's added a whole dark subterranean text to the trip, because really the experience was very up — a sense that something had been achieved," he says. "You get a real sense of skill and ability from the troops."

MacKay's group watched the troops set up a roadblock to stop the movement of arms, reopen facilities like schools, markets and wells in areas they had successfully secured, hand over uniforms for a newly established police force and repair water pumps.

"They went as peacemakers, not peacekeepers," he remarks. "They have to secure front-line areas. That was their mandate and they've done it. And they've brought in a lot of arms through an amnesty."

However, one of the complaints from the Canadian troops while he was there was that supplies and machinery to repair pumps were not getting through from other international partners. MacKay explains that the Canadian troops had promised teachers and policemen they would be paid with food and water.

"Water is the lifeblood. One of the majors said he if had five pumps he could secure an area."

Watching the Canadians at work, MacKay was struck by the contrast between their armoured vehicles and the So-

malis' donkeys and camels, and plans to make such contrasts the focus of his work.

"My interest was in attempting to get a number of portraits — not only of the troops but also of the Somalis. I was interested in the very simple juxtaposition between the western military presence and the Somalian reality."

MacKay is now working on a series of large portraits in charcoal and chalk pastel on industrial-strength paper that show, for example, a veiled Somali woman with an armoured soldier with a camel. Like previous artists the Forces have employed, MacKay's style is fully representational, but the artist, who until last year also served as the director of the Power Plant art gallery at Toronto's Harbourfront, also uses a variety of less traditional techniques. The current work includes a photographic piece based on the image of the mother washing her child in blood. And it features *Probe*, a photograph of a Somali woman shielding her face from his camera combined with a Canadian newspaper clipping about the incident at the Belet Huen detention centre under a headline that begins with the word *probe*.

Under the terms of his contract with National Defence, which included his expenses in Somalia but no fee for the art he will create, he will show all the work to the department by the end of the year. Officials can then can pick four works for the department's own collection but MacKay does not expect *Probe* to be among them.

PORTRAITS of the PEACEMAKERS

ART

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