War artist captures strong images in his sights

"...My sense is that if myself and the media had not seen Matchee being removed from the holding cell at that point in time, the Somalia Inquiry might not have happened..."

by Johnnie Bachusky

When **Allan Harding MacKay** was hired by the federal government five years ago to record images of Canada's peacekeeping involvement in Somalia, a distinction was made between artist and journalist. "The very simple way I do that is that five years later I am still dealing with the images," said the 53-year-old artist, who moved to Banff from Calgary last June. "Where I would suggest as a journalist; one goes in, does a story and then you move on to another story. That's the distinction I would make."

MacKay was commissioned by the **Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program** in March, 1993 to document the force's humanitarian aid missions in Somalia, a military operation that was assigned to the **Canadian Airborne Regiment**, at that time Canada's elite combat unit.

During the artist's six days in the blistering heat of Somalia, and while thousands of United Nations soldiers helped starving and helpless civilians of the war-torn African nation, MacKay and several journalists witnessed the removal of **Master Corporal Clayton Matchee** from a holding cell in the Canadian compound in Belet Huen. They would later learn Matchee had attempted suicide at about the same time revelations came to light that a Somali teenager had died following torture.

"We didn't know what was going on, obviously," said MacKay during an interview inside his rented studio at The Banff Centre. "It was only through being around for a few days and rumours and whatever that we were able to detect that a civilian had been tortured and killed."

The glimpse of Matchee by MacKay and others was the first view Canadians would have of a national controversy that would rock the country at its very foundations for the next four years — a debate which split the military at its highest ranks and jolted Canadians through a subsequent inquiry that, for some, ended too abruptly early last summer, amidst damming allegations of cover-up and deceit.

PHOTO BY JOHNNIE BACHUSKY

Artist Allan Harding MacKay is working on many images in a Banff studio.

For the next four years, the Somalia experience would often dominate MacKay's art, and on Friday (Jan. 9) the former director of **Lethbridge's Southern Alberta Art Gallery** will bring his war experience to Calgary's **Stride Gallery** in a multi-visual art show which will last until the end of the month. It is the first art exhibition of any kind he has put on in Alberta in more than a decade.

The Stride Gallery exhibition, entitled **Somalia Yellow Vignettes**, will include a 19-minute 1994 video from Somalia, collages — a combination of text and drawing that allude to the now infamous inquiry, and three lithographs from his Somalia experience which were commissioned by The Banff Centre. When the Calgary exhibition finishes on Jan. 31, MacKay's Somalia work, a 12-piece exhibition — will then go on display Feb. 12 at the **Canadian War Museum** in Ottawa.

"It's an ongoing creation of pictures from that experience — that's the bottom line," said MacKay of his Somalia exhibition. "It's informed in different ways, both by my immediate experience there or the media experience of revelations that have happened after.

"The reality is a lot of the work that I have done since that trip has not dealt with the misdeeds of the military," said MacKay, adding that the military's exemplary humanitarian work in Somalia has been overshadowed by the inquiry and accompanying controversies.

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