

*"Coming back is in accord
with Keeping Still"*

I Ching



Foreword

The tradition of the portrait in the history of art is one that is long and richly complex. Expected to present at least a tolerable likeness of its subject, the portrait can indeed go further. To the viewer can be revealed the concerns of the artist and the sitter and their social and cultural environment. Portraits can communicate a wonderful variety of messages that inform, amuse and challenge. Pose, costume, gesture, possessions, all can suggest directions for our thoughts and explorations. And should we ever tire of looking below the surface we can again enjoy the portrait simply for its ability to entertain the eye. Visitors to this exhibition will discover that Allan MacKay's portraits, large in size and concept, have appeal for both our visual and critical faculties. Bruce Ferguson's essay is especially informative for placing these works in the broader context of the artist's career. Rooted in the Island, Allan MacKay's portraits speak to our traditions as well as to his own. In realizing this exhibition the Gallery has received the support of the Canada Council and the Friends of Confederation Centre. We acknowledge the assistance received from the Artist, Allan MacKay, and from Bruce Ferguson of Montreal, and we extend our thanks as well to the five families for their cooperation with this project. Lionel Stevenson of Camera Art, and Alan MacLeod and Arnold Pothier of Island Offset, have also made valuable contributions that we wish to acknowledge here.

Mark Holton

FIVE FAMILIES

An exhibition organized by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum,
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada
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Return of a Native Son: Or Home-town Boy Makes Good Art

Within the Canadian art milieu, Allan MacKay is well-known by some as a sporadic artist of installation cum audioperformance works, as well as the producer of a series of idiosyncratic 'books'. The books are physically transformed into densely textured objects obscuring or denying their intended literary content (or as Alf Bogusky has put it... "the poignancy of unknown truth"). Or MacKay is known as a curator and exceptionally adept art administrator who successively ran the innovative and experimental programme at the gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax; the responsibly pluralistic community-oriented Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, Alberta, and as the Director who administrated the mature programme of visual art and related events at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Or he is as well-known as a legendary clown, a living performance artists of the spontaneous-the unannounced theatre of the everyday absurd. A seemingly fortunate clown with a guardian angel with perfect balance who has held him on precarious ledges of windows, balconies, roofs, and icy roads to produce collective laughter where its flipside, tragedy, was imminent. And some know him for all three legacies; three discreet and apparently different aspects which form a complex history which is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to unravel. I think an attempt is worthwhile in the face of these particular works in this particular exhibition. This is not to try to discover the intentionality of the artist as though that truth could even be available, but to suggest, at least partially, how he has come to these subjects, and these subjects in this style at this time. For it is my contention that these works are not simply the product of an art history, somehow objective and rational, but that they are the result of a lived experience too; a lived experience which has in this exhibition, for certain, returned to its place of origin bringing with it the familiar and foreign.

As I write these words, I am listening to Allan's voice from a cassette on my tape deck, from an "interview" I made with him in his present studio in Bern, Switzerland. His recorded voice, like his own in conversation, is hesitant, surprisingly serious, slow, and eminently careful. It is full of a language full of acceptance, patience and analogy ("a kind of ...", "sort of like ...", "or whatever ...", "the whole thing ..."); a language that deliberately does not submit to pinning itself down - to committing itself to any finality. It is still left open by its awkward generalities, its reluctance toward any conclusion or absolute. And his Donald Duck-like sounds and laughter punctuate the tape, perforating the sobriety of the dialogue.



What cannot be reproduced on this machine (the tape recorder or my typewriter) is the numerous ways in which Allan was often mimicking his own words even further through physical gestures (his head falling to the table with a thud at the end of a sentence), facial expressions (the eyes rolling way up as he spoke), the use of things in the studio as temporary, but necessary, props to undercut, undermine, devalue his own words. What cannot be reproduced (except in the oral history of the art milieu) is his production of a vernacular vaudeville - his own subjective responses to the very act of language through counter-roles on an everyday stage (and whose effect is hardly describable). In fact, like many visual artists (and clowns), he distrusts language (deeply). Or to put it more positively, because it is not a failure or inability as much a living philosophy, he was and continues to be engaged in the search for another 'voice', for a communication more direct, more thorough, than language can provide.

It comes, then, as no surprise that his works privilege the visual and often the audio (however mediated) or laughter (from the "performances") as forms of "lived experience", qualitatively different from uses of language. The shared sense of frustration among some artists today in a culture overdetermined by theories of language (and no more so than in Canadian art criticism) points to a history of repeated warnings against the text, particularly, as **the** form of knowledge. For instance, Palmer writes about how far back in history such feelings about written texts are established in Western culture...

"Plato emphasizes the weakness and helplessness of written language in his SEVENTH LETTER and also in the PHAEDRUS. All written language calls for a transformation into its spoken form; it calls for its lost power. Writing language down is an "alienation of language" from its living power - a SELBSTENTFREMUNG DER SPRACHE, a self-estrangement from speaking".²

MacKay's skepticism goes even further, beyond desires for a return to oral community as authentic (a desire shared by Adorno and McLuhan for example), to include the spoken language as well. His overlapped tracks in the audio tapes are so complexly interwoven that even those with language are integrated until sound alone becomes the 'sense' of the work. This is a search for a lost power (what John Bentley Mays has called... *"the soul's wild war music"*)³ even more primal than speech acts. Or to put it even more positively again, he values (and this incessantly) the physical moment captured, when the communication of imagination is seen in the kinesics of the quotidian; the movement of the everyday; the living actors and actresses on the constantly improvised stage of behaviour (when we unconsciously "give away" ourselves). This is a project of questions and curiosity over answers and full-blown methods of theory.

In short, he is a realist, but of the exaggerated sort; what Bakhtin has elaborated for us as "grotesque realism"; a producer of an art which begins in the material body and celebrates the lower stratum, the intellectual discourse of the body that eats, drinks, copulates, smells and feels. The body as a ground zero for experience before articulation, before socialization, before all rules (including those of language) governing correctness. In Bakhtin's work, the bodily element in "grotesque realism" is deeply positive or assertive, as fertility, growth, and a "brimming-over abundance". He says...

"The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity ... the stress is laid on those parts of body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world ... It is represented in painting by Hieronymus Bosch and the elder Breughel".¹

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964



It may be described as a caring for the physical world, and for its possibilities, its desires, its foibles, its weak defense of itself against entropy and death.

To become this artist, finally, and not the clown and not the administrator middle-managing art, has been a long and slow and somewhat circuitous route for MacKay. His original 'art' experiences were part of the provincial construction known to a Canadian small town in the nineteen fifties. Culture was the local CBC radio affiliate. Art was wild-life landscapes or the fantasy projections outward by copying Star Weekly magazine portraits of Elvis Presley or famous hockey players. Growing up in a close family progressively brought closer by a series of personal tragedies, MacKay led the imaginative life of a nonmobile loner, inventing games and using design (cars, toasters, all-star hockey uniforms) as an outlet for expression, but one which was always commercially oriented (in the sense of practical skills). These experiences of the town, of his friends, of his roles have continued to fill the dream life of his adulthood. Formative and deep in the unconscious psychological makeup, his Charlottetown dream structure made conscious has become the implied subject for this most recent series of portraits. There is, what he calls, a "connective tissue", both a nostalgia and a reality, which was broken when he left to go to art school in Halifax (from an island culture, figuratively and literally, isolated, but with a sense of real limits).

In Halifax, MacKay encountered students from other parts of the Maritimes. This was a time for him of intellectual awakening, despite the measure of the academic level at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design at the time. There was the usual student comradery, a new sense of the serious possibilities of the importance of art-making, and a romantic introduction into the "bohemian" values of Halifax's version of the Sixties counter-culture -

la general shift from the older more secure values of his upbringing to a more cosmopolitan and "Cultural" outlook. Such a fracture from known values to those more highly embedded in an urban environment were typical of the marginal to dominant transition, culturally and psychologically, of a phenomenon understood in the Maritimes as a 'Goin Down the Road' ciphOr for alienation. The flavour of this four-year experience was individualist and existentialist (informed by readings of Sartre and Huxley and by contact with mythic local artists). MacKay experienced a typical but painful growing foreignness from his home (a true "homesickness").

After graduating from the College, MacKay successively became a scene painter at CBC TV (painting the floors for the Don Messer Jubilee show set), then a display artists at Fort Louisbourg, and finally went out to Vancouver to seek his artistic fame and fortune. His ambitions were still that of an innocent provincialism as he drove across country with naive enthusiasm, but he was to return a few weeks later in a state of depressed disillusionment having fulfilled his own version of Goin Down the Road unselfconsciously. On his return, he became the assistant curator of the new Centennial Art Gallery, a centenary project accomplished under the leadership of the local Halifax artist, Tony Law. It was here, more through accident than design, by contacts with the National Gallery's extension programme and the Atlantic Provinces Art Gallery Association, that MacKay got practical training as a curator and art administrator responsible to public policy. His own art work at the time was sporadic, uncommitted, somewhat directionless, with the romantic elements of pursuing art-making gained at school slowly being ebbed away by the realities of making art without pedagogical guidance or any marketplace.

During his tenure as assistant curator, MacKay initiated exhibitions of young local artists as well as began to respond to the new faculty members at NSCAD employed by the then new president Garry Kennedy. Kennedy, a Canadian who had done his post-graduate work in the United States, had begun a systematic shift in the teaching emphasis of the college. A deliberate americanization of the faculty was an essential part of Kennedy's instrumental positivistic approach designed to rid the school of its apparent parochialism. As well, more and more American students were entering the programme which was also becoming well-known for its experimental print project and its ever current visiting artists programme. Like most local artists, MacKay's initial response to this new input of intellectual energy and contemporary information was positive and he aligned himself with some of the activities occurring at the college while maintaining his local contacts.

As he was developing a methodology of management or a clear philosophy with regard to the art gallery profession, MacKay was hired by Kennedy in 1970 to be the gallery director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery, located within the college. MacKay entered into the new spirit of the school, organizing and installing shows which were powerful for their innovative nature, with such artists as Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Lawrence Weiner and A.R. Penck





being introduced to a narrowing community of interests. The educated-in-America faculty were to remain quite negative towards the local community and the defensiveness of the local art community gradually replaced its original interest in the new president and his ghettoized faculty. Although MacKay's artistic knowledge was to become highly influenced by this hothouse introduction to late modernism (conceptualism and minimalism, in particular), as a non-faculty member his role was consistently reduced and he still retained his relationships developed earlier in the community at large. In some very clear ways, then, MacKay can be seen to singularly embody this cultural rupture; an institutionally-driven division between a long-standing regional historical outlook and an international version of parochialism imposed into it (the American artworld being as Frederick Jameson has described American culture in general... "local, yet globalizing"¹⁵. The external aspects of this head-on collision of two narrow value systems were in some ways internalized by MacKay himself. He became an unacknowledged and unsuccessful mediator of this cultural disjuncture, giving its stubborn inconclusiveness a symbolic expression through spontaneous performance outlets. (It was during this period that he literalized "table-hopping" at the Lord Nelson Tavern and taught "braille-driving" during icestorms as well as beginning to write Joyce's ULYSSES from the back forward). Of course, it is not as simple as I've just written and there were other factors. It was not just cause and effect, but I think there is reason to see that MacKay in retrospect was a kind of cultural seismic register of the entrenched dilemma. His generosity of spirit was pitted against the two unifying and unforgiving polarizations.

The sustaining, I hesitate to use the word, aesthetic that provided his continuity, his sense, his regular pulse throughout the shifts was the clown's anarchic laughter. No witty one-liners of the boulevardier but the articulate body responses of the 'Rowdyman' - the common sense of laughter in the face of terror, tragedy, displacement, frustration or pure boredom. No modernist ennui as a tailored posture of sophistication but rough and tumble head-over-heels, on the balcony, on the roof, with shaving cream oozing from every free space of a jacket, driving in reverse, dancing on ice, antic collecting. Not antisocial but pre-social, the desire for a communication before language, before desire is socialized and discourses reified.

With NSCAD's move to downtown Halifax and a deemphasized and de-professionalized gallery, MacKay left to become a Director in Lethbridge, Alberta. (His most notable legacy of localism in Halifax, co-curated with Lionel Simmons, was photographs of the architectural phenomena of corner grocery stores and his frustrated relation to the College was summed up in an ironic bookwork where conceptual methods were used to uncover a content called All the thanks I ever got from G.N.K. - referring to the College's President and consisting of empty pages with the exception of one xerox copy of a short telegram from Kennedy to MacKay). Despite the negative aspects of MacKay's (and other's) aggressive relation to the College, there is no doubt he was formed by its intense intellectual environment with relation to art.

This is evident in the work he produced in Lethbridge as an artist. The books and the folded paper pieces, based on a structural understanding of the nature of books and paper, were highly informed by the conceptual emphasis at the College. These desecrating gestures (painting, folding, cutting, cursoring and editing) owed much to the task-oriented instrumentality which charged the years of the College in the early 70s. The frustration felt by MacKay (and others) from the time in Halifax had more to do with the lack of social engagement, or more correctly, social consideration, which was at deliberate odds with the cultural environment historically permeated with local pride and local political content. It was this aggressive frustration (which the clown relied upon) that was somewhat ameliorated in his move to Lethbridge where the community was just beginning a gallery for the first time. The enforced localism and sense of community desire through volunteerism began to play itself out in MacKay's re-realization of a public or audience which manifested itself in his ambitious and responsible programme - a programme of plural interests which paid attention to local and regional concerns as well as introducing national or international art concerns without privileging them.

The folded pieces in Lethbridge - establishing an internal drawing or internal narrative as a kind of material pathology foregrounded his later concerns which can be seen in the recent mountain oil pastels shown in Banff in 1986. Similarly, his solitary piano audio works - a combination of music, texts and "scratch" poetry or what he calls "Katzenmusic" foregrounded the installation works shown in 1985 at the Eye Level Gallery in Halifax and Mercer Union in Toronto. The comfortability MacKay felt in Lethbridge with a community (a place) was repeated and reinforced in his experience in Saskatoon. Saskatoon already had developed its own sense of a historical art project before MacKay's arrival through the institutionalized efforts of formalist artists there (in effect, another international parochialism but of the older Greenbergian kind). But, despite its roots in an all-American discourse, the Saskatoon artists and their audience were cohesive, having seamlessly bound a regional landscape tradition to a more formal abstract project. Although MacKay's training was a different and more sophisticated development with regard to formal concerns~the conceptualism of the College), he found empathy with the local project as well as other regional projects (such as the agricultural fund of the Regina artists).



All of this autocultural biography, all of this preamble is simply to say that MacKay is informed by difference - is, was, and continues to be at odds with his environment - disjuncted. To find him now, a Canadian artist living in self-imposed exile in Switzerland, not speaking the language and untrained in its legacies of cultural aesthetics is another cusp on which he sits. Not on purpose ever, but by circumstance. Originally against language in an environment of language, then against theory in an environment of theory, then local in a highly-stylized, international scene, then influenced by those concerns in a provincial community, and then politically formal in a commodity formal environment and so on, place

MacKay, like Woody Allen in the Russian foot-soldiers ranks in *Love and Death*, always one step behind, one step beside but always out of step. As can be seen by this rough chronology of this alienation, each stage was a frustration and it was the anarchic clown, the disbeliever who accommodate the ruptures, who gave continuity to an existentialist break, who integrated an internalized exile at each turn. But, with the move to Switzerland, to domestic stability and to a commitment to being an artist (gone are the administrator and the clown), these ruptures became a source of strength rather than alienation. The previously fragmented parts became the source of subject and method for MacKay's work.

Beginning with the landscape water colours of his now Swiss environment, MacKay began to seek his way "back into" Oust as he "backed" into Joyce's *ULYSSES*) a "lived experience" through art or a "sign language", motivated by his relation to the visceral, not history nor theory. This was followed by Biespiel and Mountain, My Yes as well as a series of portraits lost in "pigment storms", where the viscosity of the art materials embodies in a parallel way the viscosity of the bodies (and it is no coincidence that a woman "laughs" in a pigment storm). His discovery of Hodler, the archetypal Swiss modernist, as a source of conceptual reference pays homage to and parodies, simultaneously, Hodler's philosophy of Parallelism. In these, a series of "dialogues" occur in which, as Elizabeth Brown has said...



"They are all large and, with one exception, frontal busts of a person who seems less curious than confident about his role as an artist. In contrast, MacKay's portraits of himself are sketchier, more drawings than paintings, and describe a person more curious than confident."

The absurdity of finding himself in Hodler's paintings undermines the master's authority while paying homage to the cultural integrity in which he now participates. His distance is both one of art and of culture. Similarly, by addressing the friends and families from his adolescence in Charlottetown, he is addressing the similarities of their present conditions (married with families, same age, etc.) but also difference as represented by choices of partners, new genetic combinations in the children, physical aging, etc.).

On first glance, these new portraits are not flattering (including MacKay's self-portrait with a nose resembling a Swiss mountain). But closer inspection (the scale, the materiality) release to us not the attempt to be representations reproduced faithfully, but rather desires - strong desires for the lived experience of these bodies through time to be communicated. Knowing the body to be that "connective tissue" (of community, of memory, of the 'homesickness'), MacKay has constructed larger than life portraits which conceptually try to grasp importance: the importance of relations, of family members, of the artist to his childhood and his present. The family portraits are celebrations of the body - of the body of memory and imagination, tributes to living and surviving. They are exaggerations, but necessary ones for a feast of the forgiving body,

Notes:

1. Bogusky, Alf, 'Foreword', *A Book Of Not Knowing When We Are Going To Die Or Grow Up And Of Only Knowing A Little Bit*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, February 6-28, 1982 (catalogue)

2. Palmer, R., *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1969

3. Mays, John Bentley, *A Book Of Not Knowing When We Are Going To Die Or Grow Up And Of Only Knowing A Little Bit*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, February 6-28, 1982 (catalogue)

4. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984 (translated by Helene Iswolsky)

5. Jameson, Frederick, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1983

6. Brown, Elizabeth, "Variations on Hodler: Recent Paintings by Allan MacKay", Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff, Alberta, March 5-30, 1986 (catalogue)

7. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *ibid.*

acceptance of reality as a principle of nourishment (like MacKay's "deep voice" on audio tapes - an exaggeration of voice which is at once authoritative and equally pokes fun at itself). To take Bakhtin again in his description of such grotesque realism"...

"The mighty aspiration to abundance and to a universal spirit is evident in each of these images. It determines their form, their positive hyperbolism, their gay and triumphant tone. Their aspiration is like yeast added to the images. They rise, grow, swell with this leaven until they reach exaggerated dimensions".⁷

In some very real ways MacKay can never return home again - his experiences having created the kind of homesickness one always has for the known and the secure. But through exaggeration (the psychological time of the domain of memory and the unconscious), he has paid tribute to the connections which were there and to which he is now a familiar stranger.

Bruce W. Ferguson
27.03.86

List of Works

All works are oil and pastel on paper, 1985, from the collection of Allan Harding MacKay the Artist.

1. The Hancox Family
8 5/8 x 134 5/8 inches (149.0 x 342.0 cm)
Signed lower right: "A MacKay / 85"

2. The Hynes Family
58 3/8 x 135 1/4 inches (149.0 x 343.5 cm)
Signed lower right: "Allan MacKay / 85"

3. The MacMillan Family
58 5/8 x 128 5/8 inches (149.0 x 326.4 cm)
Signed lower right: "Allan MacKay / 85"

4. The Rowe Family
58 5/8 x 134 5/8 inches (149.0 x 342.0 cm)
Signed lower right: "A MacKay / 85"

5. The MacKay Family
58 5/8 x 133 inches (149.0 x 337.8 cm)
Signed lower right: "Allan MacKay / 85"

6. Five Guys: "Juddie", "Preacher", "Lunker", "Jack", "Rick"
58 5/8 x 142 inches (149.0 x 360.7 cm)
Signed lower right: "Allan MacKay / 85"