



ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

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Observing the Observer / Observer l'observateur

ALLAN HARDING MacKAY: OBSERVING THE OBSERVER April 2 – June 1, 2008 Curated by Andrew Hunter  
CONFEDERATION CENTRE ART GALLERY 145 Richmond Street Charlottetown Prince Edward Island

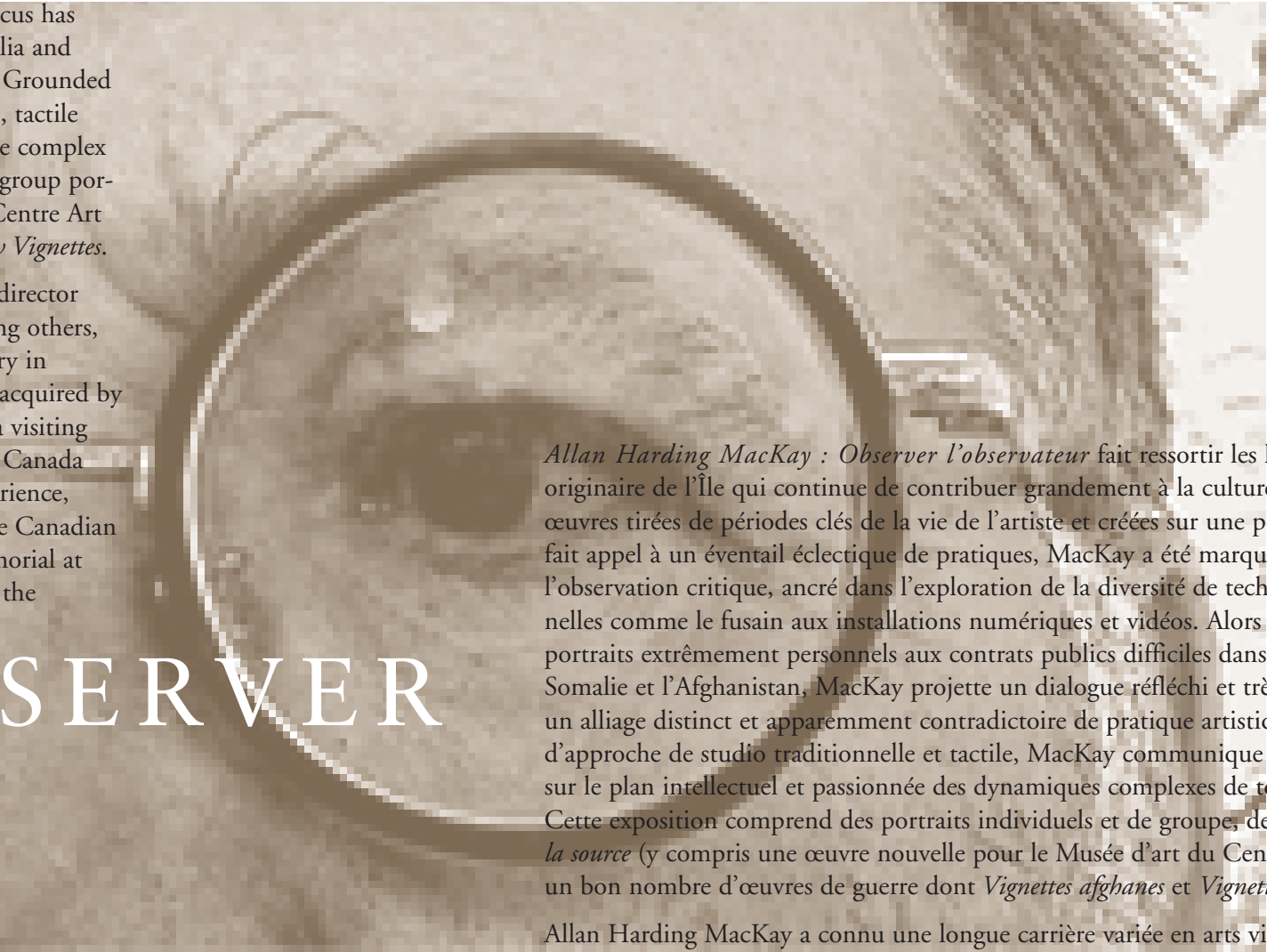
*Allan Harding MacKay: Observing the Observer* highlights the career of a P.E.I. born artist who continues to make significant contributions to Canadian culture. The exhibition features work drawn from key periods in the artist's life and over a four-decade-long career. While eclectic in its range of practice, MacKay's career is marked by a consistent commitment to critical observation rooted in the exploration of a diversity of media, from such traditional forms as charcoal drawing to digital media and video installation. While his focus has ranged from deeply personal portraits to difficult public engagements in the war-torn states of Somalia and Afghanistan, he consistently presents a thoughtful and poetically charged dialogue with his subjects. Grounded in a distinct yet seemingly contradictory blending of 1960s conceptual art practice, and a traditional, tactile studio approach, MacKay conveys an intellectually rigorous yet passionately felt understanding of the complex dynamics of the intimate, the social and the political. Included in this exhibition are individual and group portraits, key projects from the *Source Derivations* Series (including a new work for the Confederation Centre Art Gallery), *Visitation* series, and a number of war works, including *Afghan Vignettes* and *Somalia Yellow Vignettes*.

Allan Harding MacKay has had a long and multifaceted career in the visual arts as a gallery curator/director and as a professional artist. He was founding director of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery and, among others, gallery director at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon and The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto. MacKay has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally and his works have been acquired by public galleries, corporations and private collectors in Canada and internationally. He has served as a visiting artist-in-residence at several Canadian universities and art colleges and has been awarded numerous Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants. In 1996, a CBC documentary on MacKay's Somalia experience, *Changing Perspectives*, aired on national television. MacKay visited Afghanistan in 2002 as part of the Canadian Forces Artist Program. In 2006, he produced the image timeline/montage for the new Veterans Memorial at Queen's Park (Toronto, Ontario). MacKay is presently based in Kitchener where he is the curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

# OBSERVING THE OBSERVER

introduction by/introduction d'Andrew **ANDREW HUNTER**

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*Allan Harding MacKay : Observer l'observateur* fait ressortir les hauts faits de la carrière de cet artiste originaire de l'Île qui continue de contribuer grandement à la culture canadienne. L'exposition comprend des œuvres tirées de périodes clés de la vie de l'artiste et créées sur une période de quarante ans. Sa carrière, qui fait appel à un éventail éclectique de pratiques, MacKay a été marquée par un engagement constant envers l'observation critique, ancré dans l'exploration de la diversité de techniques, allant des techniques traditionnelles comme le fusain aux installations numériques et vidéos. Alors que son intérêt s'est tourné vers des portraits extrêmement personnels aux contrats publics difficiles dans des pays ravagés par la guerre que sont la Somalie et l'Afghanistan, MacKay projette un dialogue réfléchi et très poétique avec ses sujets. Enraciné dans un alliage distinct et apparemment contradictoire de pratique artistique conceptuelle des années 1960 et d'approche de studio traditionnelle et tactile, MacKay communique une compréhension à la fois rigoureuse sur le plan intellectuel et passionnée des dynamiques complexes de tout ce qui est intime, social et politique. Cette exposition comprend des portraits individuels et de groupe, des projets clés pour la *Série dérivations à la source* (y compris une œuvre nouvelle pour le Musée d'art du Centre de la Confédération), la *Série visites* et un bon nombre d'œuvres de guerre dont *Vignettes afghanes* et *Vignettes de la Somalie jaune*.

Allan Harding MacKay a connu une longue carrière variée en arts visuels à titre de conservateur et de directeur de galeries ainsi qu'à titre d'artiste professionnel. Il a été directeur fondateur de la *Southern Alberta Art Gallery* et aussi, notamment, directeur de la *Mendel Art Gallery* (Saskatoon) et de la *Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery* à Toronto. Ses œuvres ont fait l'objet de nombreuses expositions au Canada et à l'étranger et se retrouvent dans des collections de galeries publiques et d'entreprises et des collections privées au Canada et à l'étranger. Il a été artiste invité de plusieurs universités canadiennes et collèges d'art et il s'est mérité de nombreuses subventions du Conseil des Arts du Canada et du Conseil des arts de l'Ontario. En 1996, la CBC a diffusé un documentaire sur l'expérience que MacKay a vécue en Somalie, *Changing Perspectives*. MacKay s'est également rendu en Afghanistan en 2002 dans le cadre du Programme d'art des Forces canadiennes. En 2006, il a créé une ligne de temps/montage pour le nouveau monument de guerre de Queen's Park (Toronto, Ontario). Il est présentement établi à Kitchener et est le conservateur de la *Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery*.





## THE OBSERVER OBSERVED

He turns his face away, away from the camera and the trajectory of the bullet that has struck him, causing him to fall back, arms outstretched, his own rifle remaining in hand, erect, his fall captured, frozen in an instant, shot. The photographer watches from a distance to the right, the enemy ahead, the soldier caught in the crosshairs of two shooters, the gunman and the photographer, the three actors forming a triangle of interaction. The image printed, circulated, absorbed exponentially over time, over seven decades, to become embedded in memories, shared memories, and projected onto other memories, mapping other memories. Is it real? Did it happen this way? Was the photograph staged? These are the questions often asked of this image shot by Robert Capa during the Spanish Civil War. It has been said that the same soldier appears again later on in the roll of film, alive. Another instance echoing this is the scene of the flag raising at Iwo Jima.

Allan holds a candle to the image, a fragile flickering light that illuminates unevenly, and then he shoots again, photographing the photograph, another staged intervention, a continuous gesture of observation captured and fixed, to be printed and observed again, physically, by hand, a patina of wax coating the scene, the candle becoming the central element, the gesture of illumination becomes the subject. The surface is worked, worn and worried. The wax is built up, like the tabletop, accumulating its layers of protective surface that marks time, the passage of time and memory. I am torn between the image and the gesture of imaging, once more a triangle of interaction, the image, the artist, the viewer.

There is a body on the table, stripped and laid out, the still-cool skin pressed against the rubbed surface of old wood. A hand of a loved one cleans and caresses the body that settles in death, seeming to collapse onto a surface cleaned and caressed for a lifetime, its surface built up, a protective layer that heals and obscures, archiving decades of touch. I imagine this ritual of love and death, looking into the film of wax and gesture that illuminates and conceals the image on raw paper, unadorned, pinned to the wall.

They look away, all of them, the sitters Allan intently observes. Eyes cast down or away, away from his gaze, to focus on what, off stage, off screen. A book? Another? Empty space? Are they deeply aware of the artist's presence, his act of looking, his physical act of concentration? The camera is central to the process, a first step capturing of the image to be printed and worked, potentially reprinted and reworked, through drawing or the filters of photo editing, another layer of distance from the source, derivations from the source, that offers a strangely heightened level of intimacy. It is as if during the initial act of looking only the surface is recorded, a simple moment of registration that must be followed later, at a distance. To truly see takes time and is an act of labour.

And the photo returns, layered over as transparency, an enlarged film, here positive, not the negative of that fading tactile, physical process of image making. The film solidifies the drawing below, confirms the features and frames the gestures, complicates the act of rendering, declaring a specific moment of engagement (a particular, perhaps casual, moment stopped, fixed), laid over a slower, more drawn out (literally drawn out), performance. Here, as installed, fellow artist Ron Benner averts his gaze from the *Poor Girl Triptych*, a work of simple studies, variations—painting to photography to drawing and once more back to film. A harsh void of yellow light, the ephemeral made tangible, moves from left to right, drifts across the surface, a progressive gesture of examination that falls like the glowing shadow of the artist's gaze leaving traces on the surface of the painting. To look is an intervention, a visitation. The soft yellow spheres remain, embedding the act of looking, an act inscribed on the image and, significantly, altering and partially obscuring. She almost returns his gaze. *Poor Girl* stares just past him, over his shoulder, refusing to complete the connection. Repeated three times, suggesting a filmic sequence imbuing the yellow spheres with the suggestion of movement, from left to right, scanning, film stills, observed through another lens, a mechanical lens that adds another layer separating the observer from the observed.



[LEFT / GAUCHE]  
*Poor Girl Triptych /*  
*Triptyque de la pauvre fille,*  
1994

[RIGHT / DROITE]  
*Portrait (Source Derivation:*  
*Ron Benner) /*  
*(Dérivation à la source:*  
*Ron Benner), 1993*



[RIGHT / DROITE]  
*Source Derivation X (R.HARRIS) Eye View*  
*Variations / Dérivation à la source*  
*X (R.HARRIS) Variations sur vue des yeux, 2008*  
 inkjet on acrylic, mirror /  
 jet d'encre sur acrylique, miroir  
 Courtesy of the artist / Courtoisie de l'artiste  
 Installed with / Installé avec:  
 Robert Harris (1849-1919)  
*Self-portrait / Autoportrait, 1892*  
 bisque clay / poterie biscuitée  
 Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery /  
 Collection du Musée d'art du  
 Centre de la Confédération  
 Gift of the Robert Harris Trust / Don de la  
 Fondation Robert Harris, 1965

In Somalia, Allan wanders and records with his video camera, walking in the footsteps of Capa, in a war zone—a precarious, vulnerable space of high risk and heightened awareness. I watch and remember Pavo Urban, the young Croatian photographer killed “in action” while documenting the shelling of his hometown. There was a final sequence, his final shots, five images that record his movements out from shelter to expose himself to the shrapnel that killed him (like Capa following the advance only to be struck down in Vietnam). To get the shot, to be in a position to witness, one must be exposed. To be alert, watching is critical, essential, necessary. Somalia passes by in motion, seen from personnel carriers and aircraft. He fixes on obscure details, detritus and footsteps on sandy ground, a ground where the impression of boot steps will not last, will be quickly caressed away by the wind. He hovers in between, between the soldiers and the community, neither one nor the other. In Mogadishu, he wanders between the Canadian military and the Somali women in their desert village abattoir. He encounters the haunting space where a youth was murdered and a soldier attempted suicide, and moves on to witness the ritual cleansing of a child in blood, at dawn, the blood poured and caressed, rituals of love and death.

On the ground, a water bottle lies on its side, its contents spilling out onto stained concrete. Extracted from its sequence, it is partnered with a fragment, a detail of the artist's face, one half of his round black framed glasses prominent, the lens to aid flawed eyesight, another tool of observation, an aid to seeing. Shot in Afghanistan, the artist in the war zone, following in the footsteps of other artists, Frederick Varley and A. Y. Jackson in World War One, Carl Schaefer and Alex Colville in that war's sequel, and before that, Matthew Brady with his camera on the battlefields of the American Civil War. The paintings remain as elevated forms of reportage with no claims to objectivity. Brady saw his act differently; a work of journalism that would show the truth in war, two-and-a-half millennia after the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (525-456 BC) stated, “In war, truth is the first casualty” (a sentiment echoed by United States Senator Hiram Warren Johnson in 1917, when he stated that “The first casualty when war comes is truth”). Like *Poor Girl Triptych*, Allan's gaze is only slightly averted, but here, for once, the focus of his attention is clearly suggested. The bottle on the ground, the stain on the concrete, is it rust or blood?

For once the gaze is returned. Robert Harris (1849-1919), in his later years, gray hair and white beard, stares back, directly, through spectacles with thin wire frames. Allan has fixed on these lenses, cropped and framed them, repeating the gaze. The drawn gesture removed, here he works with a simple layering of transparencies



[ABOVE LEFT /  
 CI-DESSUS, À GAUCHE]  
*Self-Portrait /*  
*Autoportrait, 2008*

[ABOVE RIGHT /  
 CI-DESSUS, À DROITE]  
*Portrait of Alice Wei /*  
*Portrait d'Alice Wei,*  
 2001

and mirrors, delicate framed images that compliment the two Harris self-portraits. To the right, a tiny bust, sculpted in red clay by Harris, is backed by a sequence of details of the eyes, repeated four times. The head is a quarter life size, but the eyes in the image sequence have been repeated life size. Like *Poor Girl Triptych*, the repetition suggests a filmic passage of time and looking. The bust is small, frail, a quality now enhanced by the scale of the eyes in the image panel.

The clay carries a warmth of touch, caressed and worked into shape, at odds with the highly processed photographic images that have a determined harshness. Emptied of the hand of the artist, they remain analytical, coldly precise, as if the artist has stepped back to consciously contemplate his role, a situation countered by the final work added to the exhibition, a self-portrait of Allan in his studio in Kitchener, gray hair and white beard, a harsh yellow light fixture lingers, partially cut off, in the upper right of the frame. Allan's face, cast in harsh light and deep shadow, is distorted, slightly bloated by the wide-angle lens. He turns his face away, away from the camera and his own gaze, to focus on what? Allan looks slightly alarmed, as if another has entered the scene, off stage, off screen. He has removed his glasses, his vision now limited, blurred, and it is perhaps this absence that defines the image, of a man caught off guard, vulnerable, having just awoken. And then the hand returns, to manipulate chalk and charcoal and to layer the wax that will imbed pigment onto the image, this mirror image of the artist, looking at the artist, looking at the artist....

*Andrew Hunter*

ANDREW HUNTER is the director/curator of Render, the University of Waterloo's innovative arts-based research, teaching and exhibition centre. He continues to work as an independent curator, artist and writer. Hunter has produced contemporary and historical exhibitions and publications for art galleries and museums across Canada, the United States and Europe His previous artist/curator projects for the Confederation Centre Art Gallery include *In the Pines*, *The Donnelly Project*, *Seth: Bannock, Beans and Black Tea*, *To a Watery Grave* and *Dark Matter: The Great War and Fading Memory*.





*Afghan Diptych:*  
*lack all conviction / Diptyque*  
*afghan: manque total de*  
*conviction, 2007*  
inkjet video stills on acrylic,  
text on card / photo de vidéo  
à jet d'encre sur acrylique,  
texte sur carton  
Collection of / d'A. Bogusky  
and / et A. Pappert

## OBSERVER L'OBSERVATEUR

Il détourne le visage, il le détourne de l'appareil photo et de la trajectoire de la balle qui l'a frappé, l'a fait tomber, bras ouverts, son fusil en main, pointé vers le ciel, sa chute saisie, figé dans le temps, tiré. Le photographe regarde de loin, vers la droite, l'ennemi est devant, le soldat est pris entre les deux tireurs, le soldat armé et le photographe. Les trois acteurs forment un triangle d'interaction. L'image a été imprimée, mise en circulation et absorbée exponentiellement au fil du temps, pendant sept décennies, pour s'incruster dans nos souvenirs, souvenirs partagés, et projetés dans d'autres souvenirs, cartographiant d'autres souvenirs. Est-ce vrai? Les choses se sont-elles réellement produites ainsi? La photographie a-t-elle été mise en scène? Ce sont des questions que l'on se pose souvent au sujet de l'image prise par Robert Capa durant la Guerre civile en Espagne. On dit qu'on peut revoir le même soldat, plus tard, sur le même rouleau de pellicule, vivant. Un autre cas qui rappelle cette scène est le salut au drapeau à Iwo Jima.

Allan tient une chandelle devant l'image, lumière fragile clignotante qui éclaire inégalement, et il appuie encore sur le déclencheur, photographiant la photographie, une autre étape d'intervention, geste continu d'observation saisie et figée, à imprimer et à observer encore, physiquement, à la main, la patine de cire recouvrant la scène, la chandelle devenant l'élément central, le geste d'illuminer devenant le sujet. La surface a été travaillée, elle est fatiguée et troublée. Il y a une accumulation de cire, comme sur le dessus de la table, accumulation de couches de surface protectrice qui marque le temps, le passage du temps et le souvenir. Je suis déchiré entre l'image et le geste d'imaginer, autre triangle d'interaction, l'image, l'artiste, le regardeur.

Il y a un corps sur la table, dénudé et étendu, la peau encore fraîche reposant sur la surface frottée du vieux bois. La main d'une personne chère lave et caresse le corps qui s'enfonce, semblant s'affaïsser dans une surface lavée et caressée pour toute une vie, sa surface enduite d'une couche protectrice qui guérit et obscurcit, archivant des décennies de touchers. J' imagine ce rituel d'amour et de mort, regardant dans le film de cire et le geste qui illumine et cache l'image sur du papier brut, dépouillé et épinglé au mur.

Ils détournent leur regard, chacun d'eux, les veilleurs qu'Allan observe intensément. Le regard vers le sol ou détourné, loin de son propre regard, fixant quoi, hors scène, hors écran. Un livre? Un autre? Le vide? Ils sont tous profondément conscients de la présence de l'artiste, du fait qu'il regarde, de son geste physique de se concentrer? L'appareil photo est au cœur de la démarche, première étape de la saisie de l'image à imprimer et à travailler, à peut-être réimprimer et retravailler, par le dessin ou par des filtres, une autre couche de distance par rapport à la source, dérivations de la source, qui propose un niveau d'intimité curieusement plus grand. C'est comme si, durant le geste initial de regarder, seule la surface est enregistrée, un simple moment d'enregistrement qui doit être suivi, plus tard, de loin. Il faut du temps et du travail pour vraiment voir.

Et la photographie revient, superposée comme une épreuve transparente, un film agrandi, en positif, pas le négatif de ce processus tactile, physique et évanescent de la fabrication d'images. Le film solidifie le dessin qui se trouve dessous, confirme les caractéristiques et encadre les gestes, complique le geste du rendu d'image, figeant un moment spécifique de l'engagement (un moment précis, peut-être imprévu, arrêté, figé). Ici, son artiste et collègue, Ron Benner, tourne son regard vers la *Pauvre fille*, triptyque d'études simples, variations – de la peinture à la photographie, au dessin et de retour à la pellicule. Un violent néant de lumière jaune, l'éphémère rendu tangible, se déplace de gauche à droite, traversant la surface, geste progressif d'un examen qui tombe comme l'ombre du regard de l'artiste, laissant des traces sur la surface de la peinture. Le fait de regarder constitue une intervention, une visite. Les douces sphères jaunes persistent, enchâssant le geste de regarder, geste inscrit dans l'image et, fait important, la modifie et l'obscurc partiellement. Elle retourne presque son regard. La *Pauvre fille* regarde au-delà de lui, refusant de compléter la connexion. Répétition de trois, suggérant l'idée d'une séquence cinématographique avec ses sphères jaunes qui suggèrent le mouvement, de gauche à droite, balayage, photos de film, observant par une autre lentille, une lentille mécanique qui ajoute une autre couche de séparation entre l'observateur et l'observé.



*Source Derivation X (R. HARRIS)*  
*Eye View A, B /*  
*Dérivation à la source X (R. HARRIS)*  
*vue des yeux A, B, 2008*

Installed with two Robert Harris  
(1849-1919), self-portraits /  
Installé avec deux autoportraits de  
Robert Harris

En Somalie, Allan se promène et enregistre avec sa caméra vidéo, suivant les traces de Capa, en zone de guerre – espace précaire et vulnérable, à haut risque où les sens sont exacerbés. Je regarde et je me souviens de Pavo Urban, jeune photographe croate tué « au combat » tandis qu’il documentait sa ville sous le tir des obus. Il y a une dernière séquence, ses dernières images, cinq images qui enregistrent ses mouvements alors qu’il quitte l’abri pour s’exposer au tir des shrapnels qui l’ont tué (comme Capa suivant la progression des troupes et se faisant frapper au Vietnam). Pour obtenir l’image, pour être en position de témoin, il faut s’exposer. Pour être alerte, il est primordial, essentiel, voire nécessaire de regarder. La Somalie défile, vue des véhicules de transport du personnel et des avions. Il se concentre sur des détails obscurs, détritux et pas sur le sol sablonneux, un sol sur lequel les traces de bottes ne durent pas, un sol qui sera vite caressé par le vent. Il rôde autour, entre les soldats et la communauté, ne faisant partie ni d’un groupe ni de l’autre. À Mogadishu, il erre entre les soldats canadiens et les femmes somaliennes dans l’abattoir désert du village. Il aboutit dans un espace hanté où un jeune a été assassiné et où un soldat a tenté de se suicider, il est ensuite témoin de la purification rituelle d’un enfant dans le sang, à l’aube, le sang qui est versé et qui caresse, rituel d’amour et de mort.

Sur le sol, une bouteille d’eau renversée déverse son contenu sur le ciment souillé. Extraite de son contexte, elle est jointe à un fragment, un détail du visage de l’artiste, la moitié bien visible de ses lunettes rondes à monture noire, les lentilles qui aident sa faible vision, autre outil d’observation, appareil de correction visuelle. Frappé en Afghanistan, l’artiste en zone de guerre, suivant les traces d’autres artistes, Frederick Varley et A. Y. Jackson durant la Première Guerre mondiale, Carl Schaefer et Alex Colville durant la suivante, et, avant eux, Matthew Brady avec son appareil photo sur les champs de bataille de la Guerre civile américaine. Les peintures demeurent des formes plus élevées de reportage et ne prétendent pas être objectives. Brady considérait ses gestes différemment; travail de journalisme qui révélait la vérité au sujet de la guerre, deux millénaires et demie après

sur le dramaturge grec Eschyle (525-456 avant J.-C.) dise, « La vérité est la première victime de la guerre » (propos repris par le sénateur américain Hiram Warren Johnson en 1917, « La première victime d’une guerre, c’est la vérité. ») Comme celui de la *Pauvre fille*, le regard d’Allan n’est que légèrement détourné, mais ici, pour une fois, on voit clairement ce qui retient son attention. La bouteille sur le sol, la tache sur le ciment, est-ce de la rouille ou du sang?

Pour une fois, le regard est retourné. Robert Harris (1849-1919), vers la fin de sa vie, cheveux gris et barbe blanche, soutient le regard, directement, derrière ses lunettes à fine monture métallique. Allan s’est concentré sur ces verres, les a cadrés et encadrés, répétant le regard. Le geste de dessiner est absent; ici, il ne travaille qu’en juxtaposant des diapositives et des miroirs, images délicatement encadrées qui complètent les deux autoportraits de Harris. À droite, un petit buste, sculpté dans l’argile rouge par Harris, est à l’avant-plan d’une série de détails des yeux, répétés quatre fois. La tête mesure le quart de sa taille réelle, mais dans la série d’images les yeux ont leur taille réelle. Comme la *Pauvre fille*, la répétition suggère le passage cinématographique du temps et du fait de regarder. Le buste est petit, frêle, qualité maintenant rehaussée par l’échelle des yeux dans le panneau de l’image.

L’argile porte la chaleur du toucher, de la caresse et de la main qui l’a modelée, contraste avec les images photographiques très travaillées qui ont nettement un caractère sévère. Sans les mains de l’artiste, elles conservent une précision froide et analytique, comme si l’artiste s’était volontairement retiré pour consciemment contempler son rôle, situation que vient contrer la dernière œuvre ajoutée à l’exposition, un autoportrait d’Allan dans son atelier de Kitchener, cheveux gris, barbe blanche, un luminaire jette une dure lumière jaune, partiellement coupée, dans le coin supérieur droit. Le visage d’Allan, marqué par la lumière dure et l’ombre, est déformé, légèrement gonflé par l’objectif grand-angle. Il détourne le visage, loin de l’appareil photo et de son propre regard, pour regarder quoi? Allan a l’air un peu inquiet, comme si quelqu’un d’autre était entré sur scène, hors scène, hors écran. Il a enlevé ses lunettes, sa vision maintenant limitée, embrouillée, et c’est peut-être cette absence qui définit l’image, celle d’un homme pris par surprise, vulnérable, à peine éveillé. Puis, la main revient, pour manier la craie et le fusain, pour juxtaposer les couches de cire qui vont ancrer le pigment dans l’image, cette image miroir de l’artiste, qui regarde l’artiste, qui regarde l’artiste...

*Andrew Hunter*

Le conservateur de cette exposition est ANDREW HUNTER, directeur/conservateur de Render, le centre de recherche, d’enseignement et d’exposition sur les arts innovateurs de l’Université de Waterloo. Andrew Hunter a monté des expositions contemporaines et historiques et il a écrit pour les musées et galeries d’art de partout au Canada, des États-Unis et de l’Europe. À titre de conservateur et d’artiste, il a notamment créé les expositions suivantes pour le Musée d’art du Centre de la Confédération : *Dans les pins*, *Le projet Donnelly*, *Seth: Bannock*, *Beans and Black Tea*, *La mer lieu de repos éternel* et *Matière sombre : la Grande Guerre et l’éclipse de la mémoire*.



## REFLECTIONS ON AN ARTIST’S LIFE IN THE ARTS

[John Will] Allan, although you were born and raised in Prince Edward Island, much of your work has germinated from your experiences in a myriad of geographical locations: Halifax, Lethbridge, Saskatoon, Switzerland, Toronto, Sudbury, Calgary, Banff, Kitchener, Somalia, Afghanistan and elsewhere. With this major exhibition of your work taking place in your hometown, are you in a sense “going home again”?

[Allan Harding MacKay] No, but upon further thought, one does return through memory and dream, in spite of the changes and continued physical disappearance of what once comprised the entirety of youthful experience. The neighbourhood trees have grown; the streets have shrunk. The oil tanks with surrounding frog ponds that hosted seasonal activities like ice hockey, raft building in the spring, the summer and fall gatherings in dark wooden forts, and year round illegal climbing on the tanks and adjacent railcars, have all been overtaken by unfamiliar industrial use. I continue to experience, on occasion, my “one square mile dreamscape” that defines the geographical territory of my upbringing between the ages of three and seventeen. So the going home is a subconscious return, informed by images and emotions that upon closer analysis trace experiential history and are anchored in this physical ghosting of what I once considered home.

[JW] Staying with those early years, your student days bridged, in part, the old (pre-1967), conservative, academic Nova Scotia College of Art and subsequently the “new” Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, when almost overnight it became *the* conceptual hotbed, and as artist Les Levine wrote in *Art in America* magazine, the best art school in North America. Do you think this transition during your student days had any sort of schizophrenic effect on your practice as an artist or your thinking in general?

[AHM] As a student of the old school and a gallery director of the new school, I think of my “bridge” experience at the art college almost as a rapid eye movement from my nineteenth century art training, which was completed in 1967, to full immersion in late twentieth century *avant-garde* discourse beginning in 1970.

I dropped my earlier academic drawing/painting practice in favour of process-based investigations in audio and mixed media, returning to representational figurative and landscape-based imagery fourteen years later while living in Switzerland.

My work since has been characterized fairly, I believe, as utilizing traditional pictorial practices and materials couched within a conceptual framework. This is perhaps most evident in the *Source/Derivations* series, which has produced ten exhibition projects since 1988 and includes the most recent iteration in this exhibition.



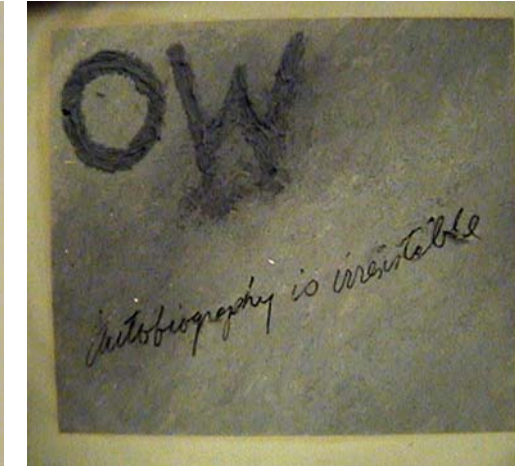
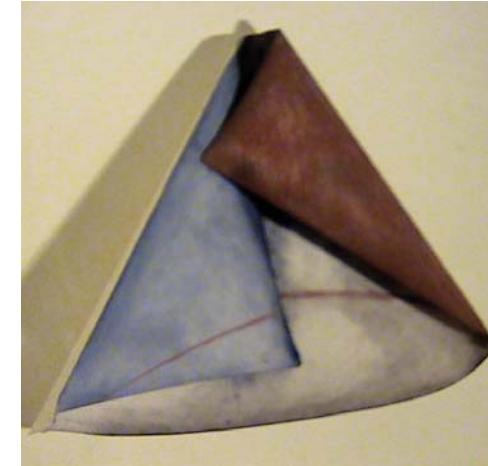
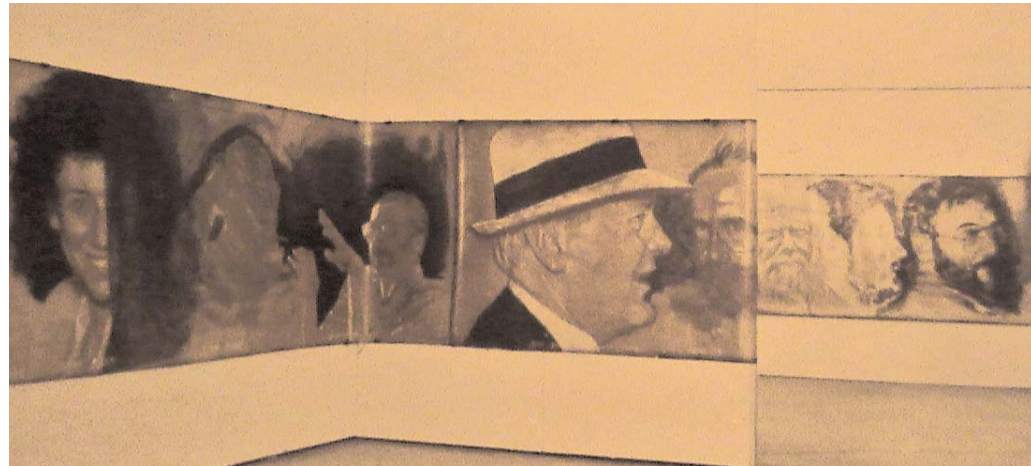
[JW] Your process-based investigations ranged over a large conceptual terrain—from the audio pieces, to the book works, to a myriad of other projects such as your “private performance pieces”—realized during this fourteen-year period—that preceded some of the performances of artists such as American Adrian Piper. I am referring to various pieces involving, at one time or another, shaving cream, stairways, and drag racing.

[AHM] One example would be the “Blackjack” tapes I did in Switzerland. The Blackjack character was the raspy, amoral moderator of the radio “Bern Boring Bern” audio series of absurdity produced in solitude in my basement studio in Switzerland, I would only say that more public performances enacting the desire to act out and allow comedic and often dangerous personas to rule the performative moment are still a mystery to me, yet it strongly appealed to my sense of the absurd and my reaction to conventions of safety.

[JW] *Some Critical Countenances: An Extended Drawing* shown at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1988, measured 5 x 545 feet long. Many consider this work to have been your most ambitious project up to that point. Charlotte Townsend-Gault wrote a brilliantly illuminating essay on that piece in the exhibition catalogue, but I wondered if you could explain how you got the idea, what it was, how long it took to do, why certain people were left out, and what happened to the work?

[AHM] By my third year in Switzerland, I had recovered the rendering/drawing skills lost through fourteen years of neglect, mostly due to interest in other art-making processes: audio, book formats, and abstract works on paper. The years in Switzerland, along with familial anchoring, gave me a reflective position from which to re-evaluate my methods of art making, and I found a persuasive desire to return to literal image making, and similarly the vocal content of the audio works took on imitative, satirical shadings that one could recognize as rooted in the representational, albeit absurdly.





As my skill level increased, I grew confident that an ambitious project was possible and the initial idea discussed with Charlotte Townsend-Gault, a former colleague from NSCAD and respected art writer, was to render/draw Canadian art critics. That idea was soon rejected on the realization that official “art critics” in Canada were almost a non-species and that it made more sense to consider the entire (limited to my associations), predominantly Canadian art world as critical countenances.

My encounters during trips to Canada over the next year or so provided the slides that, projected in my basement studio in Bern, developed into the 5 x 545 foot drawing that traced my associations during this period. So for about a year I was confronted with giant rendered heads in a cramped studio and, using a box containing all the slides, established a system of chance to determine the sequence of the subjects. This meant that by the time the entire work was to be rolled and shipped to Halifax for the exhibition, there were a number of faces not included, for, being a project that traced my previous encounters, it was not in any way meant to reflect a comprehensive capture of all who could be considered critical in their countenance.

The fate of this project, after its exhibition and my return from Switzerland to Toronto, was to be shredded by a professional trash company called ProShred. The question hanging over this action is whether it was an act of destruction or transformation by the artist. Whichever it is, the results and remains of *Some Critical Countenances* are in three burlap bags in my storage in Kitchener.

[JW] In 1993, you went from the secure enclave of a residency at the Confederation Centre in Charlottetown to an arid and politically charged place. What possessed you to go to Somalia?

[AHM] The residence studio was adjacent to the Charlottetown Cenotaph, which dedicated in 1925, commemorated veterans of WWI, and later WWII and the Korean War. The shadow of the cenotaph suggested to me that the world had to contain more possibilities than my suffocating subjectivity, and it occurred to me that artists were historically part of military operations. When I returned to my studio in Toronto, I made an application to the Canadian military who were contracting artists for foreign and domestic assignments. My application was successful and I headed for Somalia from Canadian Forces Base Trenton in March 1993.







[JW] What exactly did you do there, and what resulted from the images and ideas you came away with?

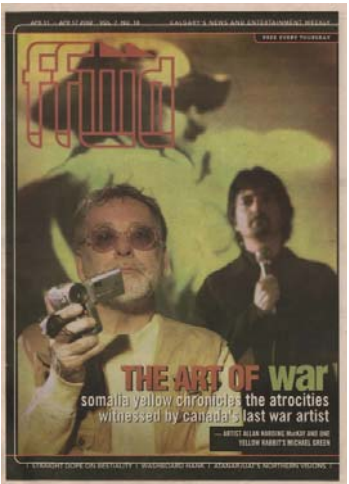
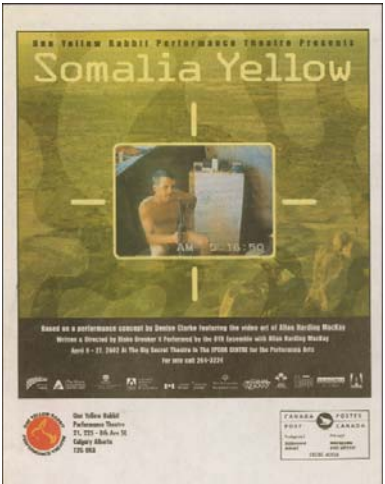
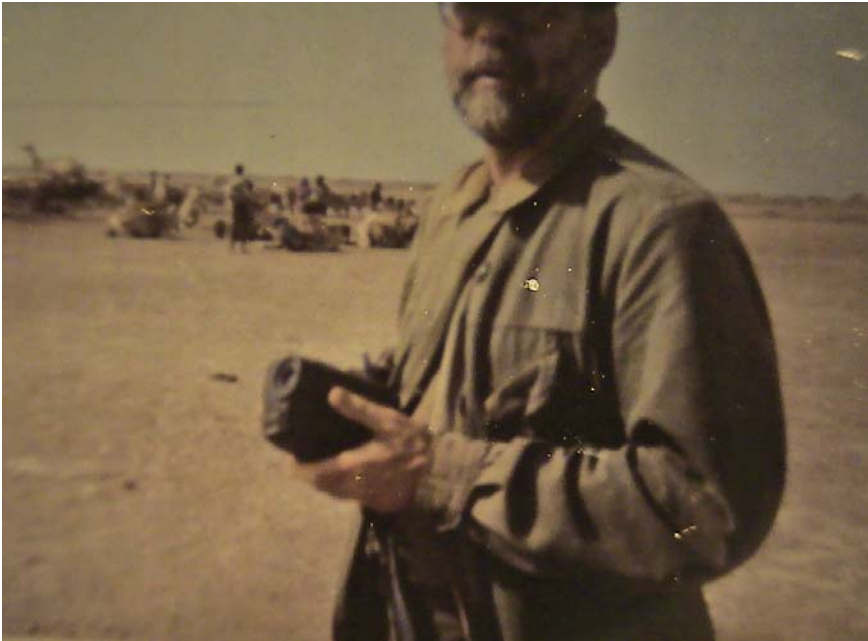
[AHM] My activities were in large measure circumscribed by the agenda that the military had established for my movements and those of the other civilians on the trip who included print and photojournalists from Canada. Having said that, and embedded as we were, the six days were packed with experiences of an assortment of locations, from the military compound in the village of Belet Huen and an extraordinary dawn visit to the village abattoir, an armed personnel carrier driving along the green line in devastated Mogadishu, and an overnight patrol and meeting up in the desert with French legionnaires who treated us to delectable croissants.

At that moment in 1993, I was the only one of the journalist entourage who carried a video camera and as a result, collected an amazing bank of moving and still images. The result of this foresight in bringing the video camera, as wisely suggested by Ted Zuber, a Canadian war artist during the Gulf War, led to a number of projects after my return. The *Somalia Yellow* series resulted in exhibitions of drawings, paintings, videos, book works, prints, magazine projects, a TV documentary aired on CBC national television and a theatre production with the One Yellow Rabbit Ensemble that opened in Calgary and travelled to Prague and Glasgow.

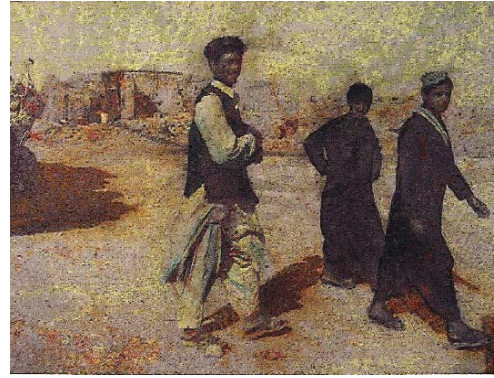
I also came away with the idea that military force used for humanitarian ends was a goal to be desired and worth fighting for.

[JW] I think one of the least discussed of the resulting projects was the theatrical piece you mentioned, *Somalia Yellow*, produced by One Yellow Rabbit Ensemble. Your performance in that play was stunning, especially in view of the fact that pretty much all you did was just sit there. Many people thought you stole the show. Calgary artist Chris Cran, told me that the professional actors were somewhat miffed at your upstaging. Didn't they realize that you were dipping deep into earlier experiments with your previously mentioned private performance pieces and your numerous audio art tapes?

[AHM] If the truth be known, the Rabbits made me look good. The risk of taking a non-professional actor (whose only experience with thespian life was the solitary characters developed in his audio works and quirky spontaneous performances), placing him center stage and constructing an entire performance around his story and images was certainly an artistic challenge for director Blake Brooker, Denise Clark and the ensemble. Their professional savvy was demonstrated in taking stage advantage of the "non-actor" persona and placing the script at hand on stage for my reference and creating a mix of documentary fact and poetic fiction. It was pure fate that I would be working with the theatre group whose approach to professional theatre and performance I most admired. To be involved with this creative team on stage, off stage and in travel, was no doubt a highlight of my career and quite a leap from my usual solitary studio activity to a method of collaboration and the stage of real time public scrutiny.







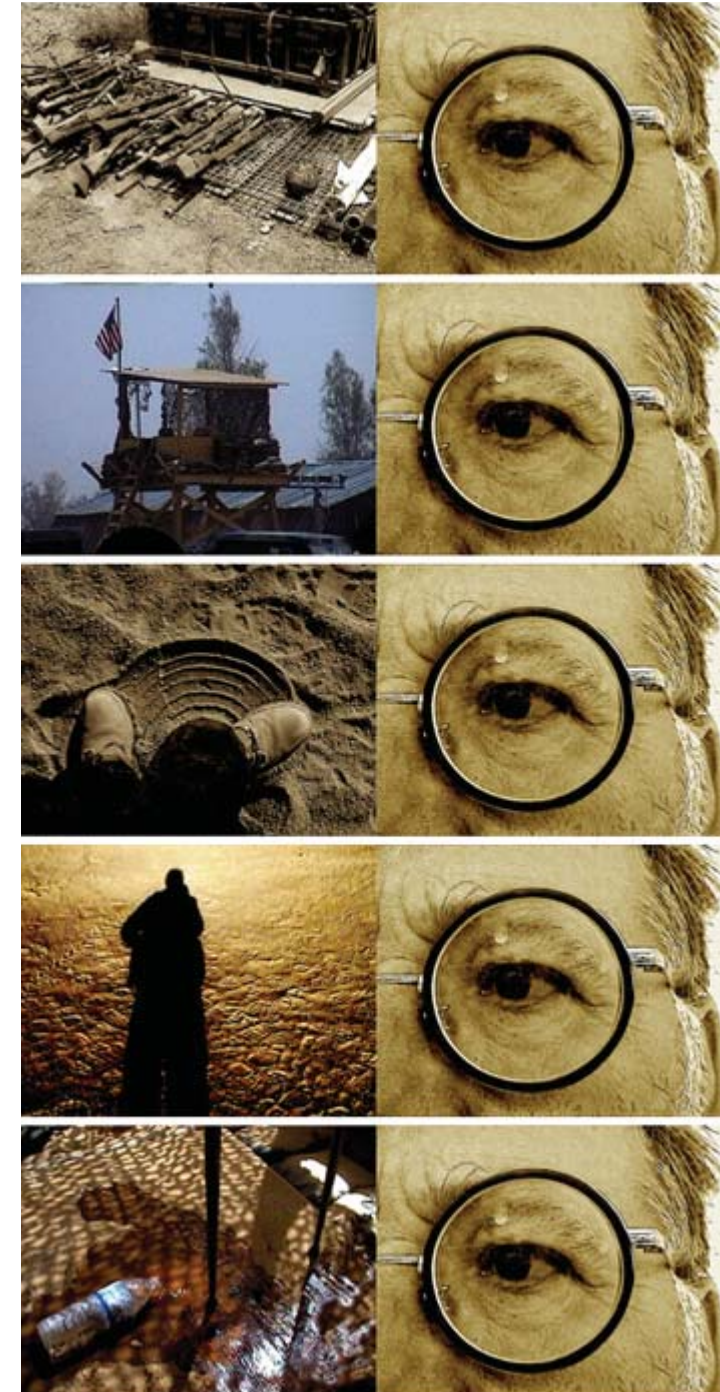
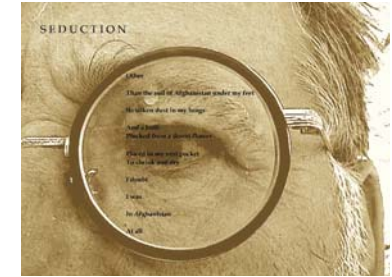
[JW] In 2002, again at the invitation of the Canadian military, you travelled to Afghanistan as an embedded observer. How was the work different from your various Somalia projects and, generally, after having served two “tours of duty,” what is your perception of your role as a combat artist?

[AHM] The brief time I spent in Afghanistan was dramatically different in experience, as were the art projects in comparison to the Somalia experience in 1993.

I was invited to Afghanistan as part of a pilot project that was test-driving the establishment of the newly minted Canadian Forces Artists Program. My window of time was four days on the ground at Kandahar airfield and its immediate environs. My movements were restricted to this site and, except for a short trip to the Tarnac Farm area where friendly fire by American air crews killed and wounded Canadian troops on the ground, my days were spent observing and capturing on video—approximately four hours of tape—the activities of the airfield and environs, as well as flying in and out of Camp Mirage in the United Arab Emirates.

Although I produced a number of works on paper, some of which became part of the Department of Defence holdings, it took me at least five years to digest what the experience meant and what artistic claim I could exercise over the source images that resulted from the video shot during the assignment. The exhibition *Double Bind*, was shown at the Sir Wilfrid Laurier University Gallery in 2007 and helped position the images in a broader context, drawing on historic poetry and language to convey my unease with the social forces that rattle on with an ever-repeating rationale for wars and conflict.

I am truly at a loss to speak with any confidence about what role an artist has in witnessing conflicts. I can, however, make a distinction between my perception of the mainstream journalist role and that of the artist. In Somalia, I was part of a small entourage of photo and print journalists. We all had cameras, so in effect our method of recording was similar. Their concern for production values was driven by an agenda of capturing newsworthy visual moments, even if constructed and predetermined, reflecting their role as members of a news/image industry. I, on the other hand, was wandering and randomly photographing and filming, confident that whatever its qualities or content, what I captured could be utilized to make something of artistic interest. The stand-alone images of the journalists may historically survive the test of time. Yet, I continue to rework my images while the journalists have moved on to other assignments.







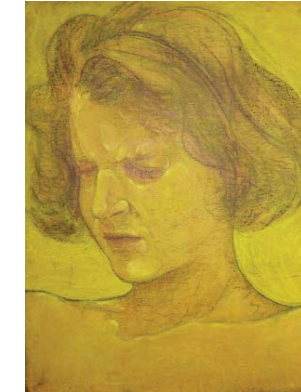
These observations clarified for me that the relationship and sense of ownership of material and content is significantly different for an independent artist and a news journalist (notwithstanding there are independent journalists who operate much as artists do, such as Rita Leister). It comes down to issues of subjectivity, observational stance, ownership and devotion to the content and its transformative possibilities over time. How the images of the journalist and the artist operate in dynamic social circumstances, and how they will be received through the changing lens of the years, is beyond my ability to judge at this point.

[JW] One of your more recent works is the Veterans Memorial in front of the Ontario Legislative Building in Toronto. Although its content is not exclusive to Somalia or Afghanistan, I would think that your experiences in those two war zones must have influenced you in formulating your ideas for the piece. I would like to know if this is so, and also, as an aside, how you coped with the complexities of such a collaborative project?

[AHM] The Veterans Memorial commission came about through the usual EOI (expression of interest), process where artists and architects independently submitted credentials to be considered. I was fortunate in that Greg Smallenberg of Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg, the distinguished Vancouver landscape architectural firm, was interested in my work and suggested the partnership. Of the short list of four who were asked to submit concepts, we were awarded the commission.

I felt that the images relating to my military assignments would at least place me in consideration on the first go-round. The creative partnership forged with Greg and his professional team made it possible to address the logistical scope and complexity of design that the project required. From my initial design concept for the wall, the process went through a number of alterations. I realized at a certain point that given the number of sequential images required to illustrate a narrative of Canadian military history, I had to treat the wall more as a documentary project and constrain the artistic and metaphoric expression to certain passages. So, with the exception of three images from Afghanistan, all other images were retrieved from historical, military, photographic and fine-art archives.

The memorial has met with praise by veterans, and even art critics acknowledged that it worked quite well as a contemporary addition to the legacy of veterans' memorials.



[JW] Currently you continue to produce drawings of the human figure and the life around you. At the same time, your Veterans Memorial seems to have kindled your interest in public art, what with two other commissions in the works.

[AHM] Through my ongoing studio work I continue to produce additions to *The Yellow Woman Harmonizes* series: a focus on female portraiture and figurative subjects. On occasion, other landscape, still life and interior subjects also appear as wax, charcoal and pastel works on paper.

In terms of public art, I am working with architects on the art component of the Pape Subway Modernization in Toronto and the Hanson Athletic Complex in Kitchener. Both projects share a somewhat similar approach in that I am taking source photographic images and transforming them stylistically and materially through etched granite, etched glass, mirrored digital and backlit formats. The results will differ in scale, location and experientially because of the surroundings. It's a very interesting process, combining solitary studio practice in developing the images with the collaborative nature of professional and public consultation and the para-studio execution of the artwork with fabricators and suppliers.

The other major difference from most studio work is that the public projects actually pay for work done. In other words, the time put in does produce a return at close to minimum wage...certainly higher than the studio work. However, who can put a price on the pleasure of Narcissus staring at his own reflection?

[JW] And finally, in retrospect, if you could have done anything different with your life, what would that have been?

[AHM] Probably very little, although I have always been fascinated by the emcee role of Eric Jessome on the Shur-Gain Amateur Cavalcade, the 1950s CFCY-TV Island showcase for young amateur performers...truly a harbinger of twenty-first century TV arts programming don't you think?

*Allan Harding MacKay was interviewed by Calgary artist John Will on 24 November 2007 at the Fountainbleau Hotel in Antigua*





Eric Jessome hosting the Shur-Gain “Amateur Cavalcade” on CFCY-TV. Date unknown (late 1950s). Photograph from the book *Out of Thin Air* by Betty Rogers Large and Tom Crothers (Applecross Press, 1989).

Reproduced with permission from the heirs of Betty Rogers Large.

Eric Jessone, hôte de « Amateur Cavalcade » de Shur-Gain, sur les ondes de CFCY-TV. Date inconnue (fin des années 1950)

Photographie tirée du livre *Out of Thin Air* de Betty Rogers Large et Tom Crothers (Applecross Press, 1989).

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#### REFLECTIONS FROM THE ARTIST’S DAUGHTER [Simone Esther MacKay]

Art has always informed my Dad’s way of relating to the world around him; it suffused both his personal and professional domains. Growing up an artist’s daughter, for over three decades, I observed his career in the official arena as an administrator of art institutions across the country, while standing witness to the rewards of the creative process, and oftentimes the struggles implicit in an artist’s practice.

I didn’t especially take to the world of art, having other interests, but what I always cherished was the wonderful relationship we shared. There has always been a deep human connection that went beyond a superficial father-daughter involvement. This allowed for a unique appreciation of the world around us, guided by a sense of awe and humility, as well as snorting, snickering, giggling and falling-down laughter at its inherent absurdity, melancholy and beauty. All this may be the essence of what artists must experience for these influences to manifest themselves in their work.

Through memory and my observations of his creative and professional ventures, I track my Dad across time and shifting locality. Although much could be told of times in Halifax where many of his artistic and creative endeavours began, one of them being me, I was too young so I begin this tale in...

#### LETHBRIDGE (1975-1978)

My early recollections of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery—where Dad was the first director—are the echoes of a rugrat’s footsteps racing about those wide high rooms, heavy equipment, and tools that lay about for installations. My interest was rarely in the works themselves. There was a friendly gallery assistant who I saw from the knees down as he patted me on the head with a “Hey, kiddo!” I also discovered the universal fascination of bubble wrap much to my Dad’s dismay, since safeguarding works of art and having *undamaged* bubble wrap at hand were his responsibility.

My parents being young and in the art world, seemed to have many parties to go to. With a little squirt on hand, the choice was hiring a babysitter, not going out, or just taking the kid along. Not going out was out of the question and as my parents were usually broke (Mom was a university student), it left the last option. In the course of an evening, as my eyelids grew heavy, I was often laid down among piles of coats in a side room. Falling asleep to the sound of jovial voices, laughter and silliness that continued until late was comforting. Then, when it was time to leave, I’d be carried over a shoulder, held tightly in the car and, at home, shoes and clothes slipped off, gently tucked into a snugly bed, and kissed good night.



After my parent’s separation, Dad moved into a large apartment over a clothing store, just across the street from the gallery. Long ropes descending from the high ceilings divided up his living space, which contained simple furnishings acquired at secondhand stores. His working quarters, an open area from the centre to the corner of the room, gave him space to paint and produce art. What stands out for me during this time, other than the complaint of the Siamese cat Jasper peeing in the heating vents—throughout those years, my parents owned a number of Siamese cats—was that Dad focused on sound works in addition to his visual pieces.

It occurs to me that acquiring a piano was a sudden decision, and from that came the first audio recordings of unmelodious piano chords accompanied by bizarre voices telling their stories. There were endless lengths of tape over time, all theatrical; capturing the voices of characters with outlandish accents rambling on to the background drama of the piano and other sampled sounds. The personas that grew out of these melodramatic productions began calling into local talk-radio shows to contribute their two cents’ worth.

#### SASKATCHEWAN (1979-1981)

Dad then moved to a lovely house in Saskatoon: he was now the director of the Mendel Art Gallery. I spent my Christmases and summers visiting from Switzerland where Mom and I had moved. Summers in Saskatoon were spent cooling off in the river, occasionally driving into the arid countryside or sitting out on the newly built roof deck overlooking the wild overgrown garden in the back.

Winters were mighty cold and Dad—like a true Canadian—made an ice rink in the backyard in excited anticipation of my arrival. Among the hibernating trees heavy with snow and icicles, and in keeping with his creative and exuberant spirit, Dad froze into the ice, photographs in which I posed in funny shapes under a large blue and white polka-dotted towel. These photos embedded in the ice, became reflections of a moment frozen in time, in turn frozen into the elements of the earth, of which more photos were then taken to capture yet another moment within the vast eternal moment of time.

The back room of the house, and part of the dining room, doubled as a studio with paint tubes, charcoal, pots of turpentine and wax littering the floor and tables. Moving from sound and theatrics, three-dimensional objects now drew his attention, and tactile textures overtook purely auditory interests. This period extended his initial interest from Lethbridge in books and wax. Dad collected many old books from secondhand bookstores and transformed them by various means. One memorable piece had a half scissor strategically embedded in a book. In others, pages were folded or turned back and coated with layers of wax that presented the book as newly interpreted. He used paint to cover all but an enhanced single word or phrases. Combined imagery and words have continuously threaded together in his works throughout the years, perhaps mirroring the inseparable correlation in which imagery inspires words and words generate images.



During my last Christmas in Saskatoon, a long roll of rice paper came to life before my eyes with a series of dragon depictions. Using a black marker to outline and then fill in with coloured crayons, Dad began a period in which I was thoroughly amused watching him liberate characters for me with his drawing. I was enchanted to see form and personality develop so quickly from blank white paper.

#### SWITZERLAND (1982-1988)

My mother Irene and Dad reunited when I was ten. Dad had left his job at the Mendel Art Gallery and arrived in Switzerland in the early summer months of 1982. He looked forward to focusing solely on his artistic work. We moved into a “stoeckli”—a little chalet-like farmhouse—in the small rural village of Hamismatt in the Bernese countryside. A tiny room to the side of the stairs was set up as a studio and there he began the solitary journey of a full-time artist.

The works that came from this rural setting reflected the moods of the countryside. Small landscape paintings and watercolours on paper captured the rich lushness of the forests and meadows, rolling hills with lone trees, and mountainous terrain. Among my favourites, which he gave to me—and I have carried from Switzerland to Canada to Thailand—is a small landscape triptych, hued in moonlight blues draped beneath the full moon with mists drifting over a forlorn, yet peaceful countryside.

Over time, these works became larger in scale with Dad’s discovery of a thick cardboard-coloured industrial paper sandwiched around a thin layer of tar in the centre. The smoothness allowed charcoal and pastels to dance their way across the surface (a revelry of substances), and it could be rolled out meter after meter. The sturdiness allowed paints, turpentine and hot wax to be mingled, to add texture and depth, without disintegrating the paper.

He expanded his studio space to a neighbour’s house where there was more room and light, but the appeal of the countryside began to diminish. He took a basement studio in the city of Bern. But as time passed, this too became a form of isolation, spending days alone in a dark, cluttered studio. And living in a country where he did not speak the language (the Swiss dialect of German, “Schwyzerdütsch”) limited his opportunities for social interaction. To contend with this ennui, the alter egos of his Lethbridge past came back to life. His imagined radio series “Bern Boring Bern” made its debut with narratives of phantom ships and a series of audio creations entitled “Wherefore art thou art?” Characters voiced their opinions in concert with archival audio works in a radio format that became the “BlackJack” tapes hosted by this deep-voiced DJ.



As the nature of Dad's work changed and shifted, one element of inspiration seemed to remain constant: he had a muse, a woman whose beauty he never failed to illuminate as time drew attention to the transforming facets of her form and face. Over the years of their ever-evolving relationship, many beautiful paintings took shape, depicting my mother in her various guises, moods and settings. This source of inspiration lost its power with his departure from Switzerland and return to Toronto. After five years and the final dissolution of their marriage, the pull to return to a job in a familiar setting overrode the need to remain in Switzerland. I was 15 and already shifting my focus to those things that matter to teenagers, and being home with parents wasn't one of them. Dad had started taking short-term contracts—he was away for periods of time—so when he returned to Canada, to Toronto, in 1988, it didn't feel like a big transition for me.

TORONTO/CALGARY (1988-1995)

Dad took the job of director at Art Metropole and moved into a live-in studio on Walnut Avenue, aptly named, for it was like living inside a walnut, complete with concrete shell and no windows. Resorting to old habits in preparing for my visits during my annual breaks, he had a simple steel loft structure built.

At this time, Dad's focus seemed to be much more on the operation of institutions, rather than his own work. He left Art Metropole to become the director of The Power Plant contemporary art gallery in Toronto. Close by his modest studio on Queen Street West was the Squeeze Club. It became a favourite nightly hangout to entertain and meet with artists.

However, the importance of his studio practice was maintained and he began painting on large wooden panels, a new surface to work on. Eight by four foot pieces came into existence in charcoal, pastels, turpentine, paints and wax. There were no framing issues or installation difficulties: if there was wall space and possibly a (little) shelf handy, voila, a painting could be installed! It was here that Dad began to develop and expand his ongoing *Source/Derivations* series, focusing on another artist's work to draw inspiration from, and creating derivations of his own making.

In the years that followed, components of this S/D project were exhibited from coast to coast—Halifax to Victoria—and Dad would send me newspaper clippings to Switzerland during my school year. They covered various undertakings, personal and artistic projects, or gallery-related endeavours. This was something that always seemed to impress my schoolmates (and me, of course!).

When I moved to Toronto, two elements stood out to me as having had a major impact on his work ever since the early 1990s—the colour yellow and his visit to Somalia as an official war artist with the Canadian military. I'll begin with YELLOW. In colour therapy it is the colour of the solar plexus chakra, representing one's personal power/confidence in the world/a bright shiny happy colour. The flip side is representing one's fears. However,



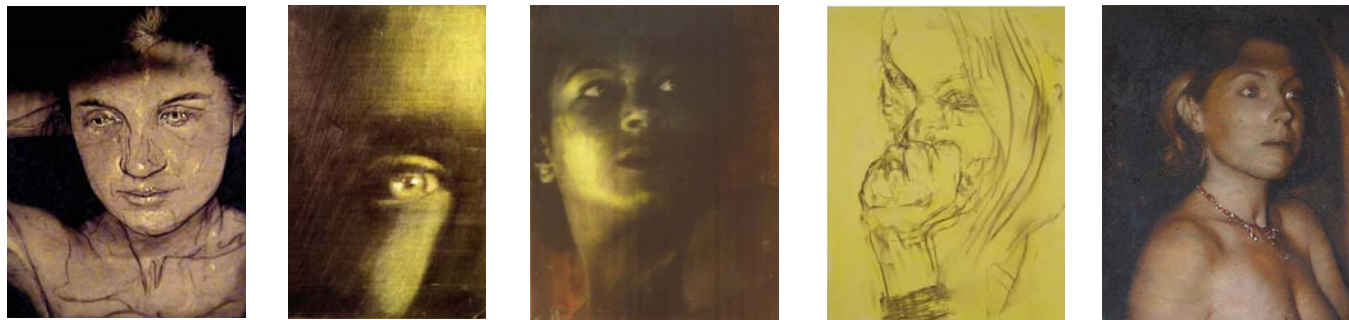
when I once asked Dad, “Why yellow?” he answered simply, “Because I like it for its graphic and attention grabbing qualities and the spiritual inferences.” So yellow took prominence: embedded into paintings, drawings, video works and appearing later in Calgary and Banff as the title *Somalia Yellow* in the theatre production with the One Yellow Rabbit Theatre ensemble as well as in the continuing female figurative series entitled *The Yellow Woman Harmonizes*.

When Dad went to Somalia in 1993, little did he know that the days spent in this warring African nation would inform his work for years to come. On his return, news stories broke about a young Somali man who had been tortured and died in the hands of Canadian soldiers. Not bound by the limitations of mass-media reporting and sensationalizing, Dad was able to reflect on the complex layers of lives and events connected with this incident and to launch his own inquiries through various mediums: video, audio, paintings, photography and even theatre.

An early morning visit to an abattoir in Somalia was another incident that left him deeply touched. He witnessed the slaughter of a calf, whose blood was poured on a sick boy, enacting a bloodbath of cleansing and healing. Dad was profoundly moved by this dual concept of a bloodbath that was both destructive and healing. He continued to reflect on this in ensuing videos, prints and drawings.







Key work that came from the Somalia experience was a series of video vignettes revealing a dance of pace, sounds, shapes and impressions of the various surroundings and undertakings of the military forces in contrast to Somalia life. To our delight, in 2001, Dad and I were able to attend a video festival in Nyon, Switzerland, where the “Somalia Yellow” video was shown. As synchronicity would have it, following his move to Banff, a Calgary-based theatre company already suitably named One Yellow Rabbit, took interest in his Somalia work and staged a production based on his Somalia experience and video explorations.

BANFF (1996-2001)

After contracts in Toronto, Sudbury and Calgary, Dad devoted himself to studio life in Banff. I remained in Toronto during this time, but was lucky enough to make many visits to this stunning place nestled within the majestic Rocky Mountains. With artist-in-residence programs, part-time curatorial work at the Whyte and Glenbow museums, independent and joint projects with other artists, musicians, writers, actors and dancers, Dad was part of a vibrant creative community that enlivened and enriched his spirit, allowing him to channel his creative gifts effectively. Although his life has always had challenges, Dad was very much in his element in Banff.

Among his many artistic ventures, an alluring element that is often present in Dad’s work is an enchantment with the feminine and the power of desire. It was expressed in hundreds of portraits and in particular, through two relationships in Toronto that touched him deeply: there are the large and intimate paintings of Margaret that capture her aqua-clear eyes contrasting in a startling way with her darker features; and Norah, his partner when I arrived in Toronto, who also inspired many exquisite drawings and paintings. It was in Banff however that the *Yellow Woman* series expanded and Dad’s portraits reveal beauty in a way that liberates each muse to express the degree of eroticism and femininity that she is comfortable disclosing. His ability to earn the trust and capture the Goddess’s air of freedom in baring her essential, eternal, and timeless secrets is what makes these images truly beautiful.

There have been times when Dad was confronted by those who viewed some of his depictions of females as derogatory and demeaning. This may say more of the “critic” than the artist, or the world we live in, obsessed with depictions of the female, sadly often oppressive or possessive in expression. As women, it is easy to be fearful about revealing our sexual, erotic and intimate nature lest it be exploited. But we do know desire, and at its truest form, the feminine nature revels in feeling desirable in the beholder’s eyes. There is allure and power in revealing these aspects of oneself and in having them looked upon with respect, reverence and yearning.

I know my Dad’s views and respect for women and understand that his fascination comes out of reverence for the feminine. His interest lies in the investigation of how the feminine shapes desire. I like to think that the “Goddess” delights in this exploration.

KITCHENER (2001-2007)

Finances often dictate the need for transition, and a welcomed job offer came from a long-time friend and former co-worker from Dad’s Lethbridge days, Alf Bogusky, the new director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (the gallery assistant who I had only seen from the knees down as a child). Moving from an idyllic mountain paradise to the sprawling city of Kitchener in Southern Ontario couldn’t have thrilled my dad, but he is admirably strong in his aptitude to move on and adapt. Settled into his curatorial position at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, he has continued to pursue artistic activities with solo and group exhibitions and public commissions (which only recently has translated into financial success).

A second invitation from the Canadian military took Dad to Afghanistan in 2002. This was a very different experience from Somalia, however, his interest in telling stories through art that mediates between the political and subjective side of the effects of war continued. His collaboration with landscape architect Greg Smallenberg, to develop the Veterans Memorial at Queen’s Park, Toronto, in 2006 allowed another form of public expression of his thoughts and ideas. The monument is noble, full of respect for veterans who have given of themselves for Canada since Confederation. The images depict the harsh, unglamorous realities of war without imposing an opinion on the viewer as to the value of the conflicts.



[LEFT / GAUCHE]  
Video projection / Projection vidéo :  
*An Icon for an Independent Spirit*,  
1985

[RIGHT / DROITE]  
*Source Derivation IX /*  
*Dérivation à la source IX*  
(*Vasily Fedosenko*), 2004

*Presence and Absence:  
The Dream of a Sleeping Giantess /  
Présence et absence :  
Le rêve de la géante endormie, 1986*



WHAT PREVAILS: 2007 AND ONWARDS...

My sense of pride when Dad is honoured professionally, matches my pleasure in seeing the weird knickknacks he collects and places around his living quarters; from mummified birds to squished toilet paper-roll sculptures and gorgeous fabrics draped oddly from ceiling to floor or simply floor to floor. It's all in how one chooses to view the world; it's about investigation and breaking through conformity; about observing and reflecting and gaining different perspectives of the world we endure, perceive, love, and live in. And lastly, it's all about the marvellous humour bouncing forth, casting that touch of exquisite madness, silliness and lightness right into the heart of our existence, which so often can paralyze us beneath its weight.

What is infinitely more valuable is the privilege and honour of being able to call Allan Harding MacKay, that profoundly talented man and true gem of a human being, my dad.

*Simone Esther MacKay*

ALLAN HARDING MacKAY: OBSERVING THE OBSERVER  
April 2 – June 1, 2008  
Curated by Andrew Hunter  
CONFEDERATION CENTRE ART GALLERY  
145 Richmond Street  
Charlottetown Prince Edward Island



**EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:**  
works courtesy of the artist, except where noted

*The Rowe Family / La famille Rowe, 1985*  
oil and pastel on industrial brown paper / huile et pastel sur papier brun de type industriel  
Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du Musée d'art du Centre de la Confédération  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 1992

*She Was... (Beispiel/Example) / Elle était ... (Beispiel/Exemple), 1985*  
pastel and oil on brown paper / pastel et huile sur papier brun

*He Was... (Beispiel/Example) / Il était ... (Beispiel/Exemple), 1985*  
pastel and oil on brown paper / pastel et huile sur papier brun  
Both Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank / Tous deux de la collection de la Banque d'œuvres d'art du Canada

*An Icon for an Independent Spirit, 1985*  
video copied to DVD format/copiée sur format DVD  
running time / durée – 26 minutes  
Collection of / du Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta

*Resistance to a Perfect Mountain / Résistance à une montagne parfaite, 1986*  
chalk pastel on industrial paper / pastel sec sur papier de type industriel

*There Is No Perfect Peer Pressure / Il n'y a pas de pression par les pairs parfaite, 1986*  
chalk pastel, oil on industrial paper / pastel sec et huile sur papier de type industriel

*Presence and Absence: The Dream of a Sleeping Giantess / Présence et absence: Le rêve de la géante endormie, 1986*  
pastel and oil on paper / pastel et huile sur papier  
Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank / Collection de la Banque d'œuvres d'art du Canada

*Whose truth we cannot test but whose pressures we cannot resist / Ceux dont on ne peut tester la vérité mais à la pression desquels on ne peut résister, 1989*  
pastel, oil, wax and dammar on paper covered plywood / pastel, huile, cire et dammar sur contreplaqué recouvert de papier  
Collection of / de l'Art Gallery of Nova Scotia / Galerie d'art de la Nouvelle-Écosse  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 1996

*Untitled (From The Charlottetown Series) / Sans titre (tiré de la Série Charlottetown), 1992*  
chalk pastel and charcoal on industrial brown paper / pastel sec et fusain sur papier brun de type industriel  
Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du Musée d'art du Centre de la Confédération,  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 1992

*Portrait of Brother / Portrait du frère, 1992*  
pastel and wax on paper-faced plywood / pastel et cire sur contreplaqué recouvert de papier  
Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du Musée d'art du Centre de la Confédération  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 1992

*Zones of Sorrow / Zones de chagrins, 1992*  
mixed media / techniques mixtes  
Private Collection / Collection privée

*Portrait (Source Derivation: Ron Benner) / (Dérivation à la source: Ron Benner), 1993*  
paper-covered plywood, chalk pastel, charcoal, oil pigment, dammar varnish, wax, photo acetate / contreplaqué recouvert de papier, pastel sec, fusain, pigments, vernis dammar, cire, photo sur acétate  
Collection of / de l'Art Gallery of Windsor  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 1994

*Somali Woman at Abattoir / Femme somalienne à l'abattoir, 1993*  
charcoal, chalk pastel on paper / Courtoisie de l'artiste  
Collection of / de Terry Heath and / et June Clark

*Source Derivation IV / Dérivation à la source IV, 1994*  
two parts; paraffin wax, colour Xerox and charcoal on paper on board / deux parties; paraffine, Xerox en couleur et fusains sur papier sur panneau  
The Art Gallery of Alberta Collection / Collection de l'Art Gallery of Alberta  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste

*Poor Girl Triptych / Triptyque de la pauvre fille, 1994*  
three parts; wax, dammar varnish, oil, charcoal, panel, halftone acetate / trois parties; cire, vernis dammar, huile, fusain, panneau, acétate  
Collection of/de l'Art Gallery of Nova Scotia / Galerie d'art de la Nouvelle-Écosse  
Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste, 2004



*Somalia Yellow Vignettes / Vignettes Somalie jaune*, 1998

Running time / durée-29:22 minutes

Video transferred to DVD / Vidéo transférée sur DVD

Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du

Musée d'art du Centre de la Confédération

Gift of the artist / Don de l'artiste

*Misun (Vermeersimultude Portrait)*, 2000

mixed media / techniques mixtes

City of Calgary Civic Art Collection / Collection d'art de la Ville de

Calgary

*Portrait of Alice Wei / Portrait d'Alice Wei*, 2001

mixed media / techniques mixtes

Collection of / d'Alice Wei and / et Joseph Heath

*Misun Portraits*, 2002

two parts; wax, charcoal, dammar, pastel, reprography on paper / deux

parties; cire, fusain, dammar, pastel, reprographie sur papier

*Somalia Nomad Sequence / Séquence nomade somalienne*, 2002

charcoal on paper / fusain sur papier

*Source Derivation IX / Dérivation à la source IX (Vasily*

*Fedosenko)*, 2004

charcoal, pastel, oil pastel, dammar, wax, inkjet on paper / fusain, pastel

sec et pastel à l'huile, dammar, cire, jet d'encre sur papier

*Source Derivation IX / Dérivation à la source IX (Vasily*

*Fedosenko)*, 2003

altered found object / objet trouvé modifié

*Visitation Series (Capa) / Série visite (Capa)*, 2005

charcoal, pastel, wax, dammar, inkjet on paper / fusain, pastel, cire,

dammar, jet d'encre sur papier

Collection of / d'A. Bogusky and / et A. Pappert

*Afghan Diptych: lack all conviction / Diptyque afghan: manque*

*total de conviction*, 2007

inkjet video stills on acrylic, text on card / photo de vidéo à jet d'encre

sur acrylique, texte sur carton

Collection of / d'A. Bogusky and / et A. Pappert

*Afghan Vignettes / Vignettes afghanes*, 2007

Here, running time / durée-5:01 minutes

Self-portrayal, running time / durée-6:52 minutes

Tally, running time / durée-2:15 minutes

Video transferred to DVD / Vidéo transférée sur DVD

*Self Portrait / Autoportrait*, 2008

charcoal, chalk pastel, oil pastel, wax, dammar on paper / fusain, pastel

sec, pastel à l'huile, cire, dammar sur papier

*Visitation Series (Pulitzer) / Série visite (Pulitzer)*, 2008

inkjet on acrylic, mirror / jet d'encre sur acrylique, miroir



*Source Derivation X (R.HARRIS) Eye View A, B / Dérivation à la*

*source X (R.HARRIS) vue des yeux A, B*, 2008

inkjet on acrylic, mirror / jet d'encre sur acrylique, miroir

Courtesy of the artist / Courtoisie de l'artiste

Installed with two Robert Harris (1849-1919) self portraits / Installé avec

deux autoportraits Robert Harris

Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du Musée

d'art du Centre de la Confédération

Gift of the Robert Harris Trust / Don de la Fondation Robert Harris, 1965

*Source Derivation X (R.HARRIS) Eye View Variations / Dérivation à*

*la source X (R.HARRIS) Variations sur vue des yeux*, 2008

inkjet on acrylic, mirror/jet d'encre sur acrylique, miroir

Installed with/Installé avec: Robert Harris (1849-1919)

*Self-portrait / Autoportrait*, 1892

bisque clay/poterie biscuitée

Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery / Collection du Musée

d'art du Centre de la Confédération

Gift of the Robert Harris Trust / Don de la Fondation Robert Harris, 1965