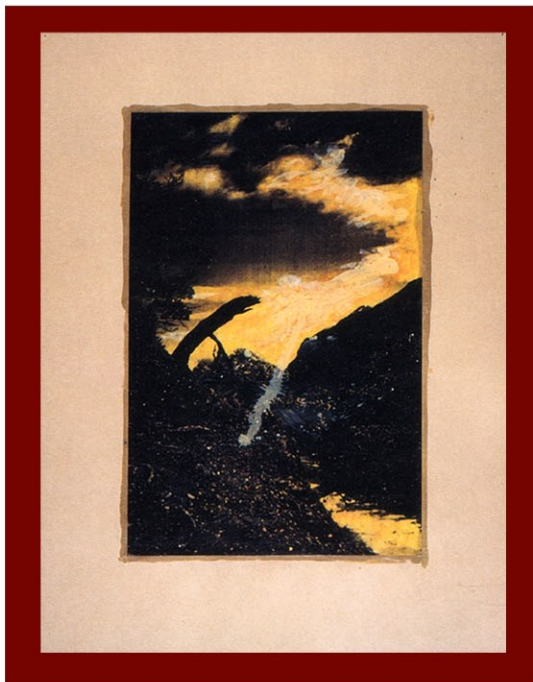


SOURCE/DERIVATIONS VI (Walter J. Phillips)

THE PAST IS
FASCINATING
BECAUSE IT
IS THE ONE
FREE PLACE
FOR OUR
IMAGINATION¹



Allan Harding MacKay, *Source/Derivations VI*, 1998
oil, wax, charcoal on paper

Source/Derivations VI: (Walter J. Phillips) is the sixth in a series of exhibitions that artist Allan Harding MacKay has created over the past decade which respond to the work of other predominantly Canadian artists.² In each *Source/Derivations* project, MacKay responds to a "source" image that he has found intriguing, and creates works - "derivations" - inspired by that source.

In this exhibition, MacKay re-examines several works by accomplished printmaker and watercolourist Walter J. Phillips (1883-1963): the woodcut print *Vapours Round the Mountain Curled* (1938) and its original print blocks, as well as the prints *Howe Sound, B.C.* (1940) and *Jack Pine* (1940), all of which are in Glenbow's permanent collection.³ The original "source" works by Phillips are also a part of the final installation. This interest in the work of other artists stems from a desire to acknowledge the past as an important source of possible alternatives for the future. Says MacKay, "The work of other artists is full of possibilities."⁴ MacKay sees his work as an apprenticeship, an opportunity to learn from others who have gone before him in order to create new ways of exploring how we have, and continue to construct our relationship as a culture to the natural world around us.

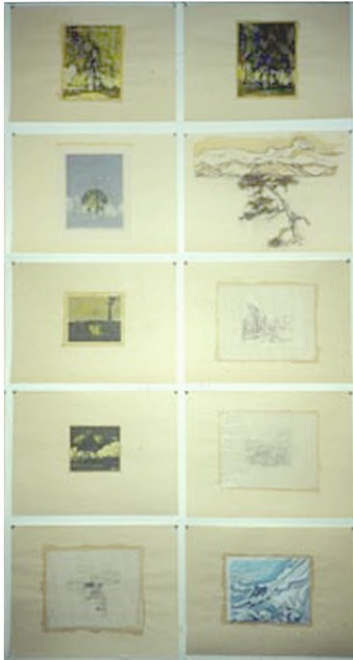
This *Source/Derivations* project is unique in that it is the first time MacKay has had the opportunity to examine the "source" work of an artist, while living in the very place which inspired the creation of that work. MacKay refers to this as the "echo of Walter J. Phillips in Banff."⁵ For the last year, MacKay has been an artist-in-residence at The Banff Centre. Phillips, a recognized authority on the print block medium, made a lasting contribution to the development of Canadian art in the West, helping to establish both The Banff Centre and the Alberta College of Art and Design. Phillips first visited Banff in the summer of 1926, returning many times to teach and for sketching trips. Inspired by the landscapes he found there, the Rockies became a major source for his work.⁶ For MacKay, his time in Banff and his interest in Phillips's work have converged to become a self-conscious exploration of the notion of place and the impact of one's environment on artistic practice. MacKay's response to Phillips's work points to the complex relationship between the development of landscape imagery about the Rockies in the first half of this century and the development of these areas as mountain parks and "wilderness" sites. In a region where the Rockies are perceived as part of the psychic fabric of who we are as southern Albertans, this exhibition provides us with the opportunity to contemplate our relationship to this landscape and its representations.

Depictions of certain landscapes play an important role as commodities in the Canadian economy. The well-known vistas of the Rockies have not only a social value in the formation of Canadian identity, but an economic one, also. Not many Canadians live or work in the Rocky Mountains, but the images of those mountains are well-known, and a fascination with the Rockies has become firmly entrenched in the psyche of Canada since it became a popular tourist site over 100 years ago, notwithstanding that for centuries the Rockies have, and continue to occupy a special spiritual and historical territory for First Nations peoples. Not only do people travel to Banff as tourists, but it has become, in the true sense of the Romantic tradition, a place of spiritual renewal and a site of national pride. Phillips's work has played a role in the depiction of this area, and has contributed to the mythic construction of the image of the Rockies. Well-known in western Canada, he worked on commissions with the Canadian Pacific Railway on several occasions, creating images of the Rockies which have graced menu covers for the Banff Springs Hotel and CPR dining cars. However, Phillips's work has remained lesser known in eastern Canada, despite his importance to the development of Canadian art in the West.



Allan Harding MacKay,
Untitled [print block], 1998
paper

This paradox has intrigued MacKay. Indeed, his selection of these images stems from his interest in the process whereby some Canadian art becomes associated with national identity. MacKay's interest in Walter J. Phillips's work began in the late 1980s, when he was drawn to the incredible graphic and decorative qualities of Phillips's images. The precision of Phillips's craft, and his skill in working with the wood block, moved MacKay to explore his work further. MacKay came to know Phillips's oeuvre, and was especially attracted to the print *Vapours Round the Mountain Curled*. "I found this print particularly intriguing because it seemed quite different from many of the other prints he had created before. Phillips was more of a realist, and for me, this work seemed very 'modern' and almost abstract."⁷



Allan Harding MacKay
Source/Derivations VI, 1998
 mixed media

The print blocks for this work were themselves seemingly "abstract" and MacKay became excited by the aesthetic possibilities that Phillips's work offered. MacKay's exploration of Phillips also led him to the prints *Jack Pine* and *Howe Sound, B.C.* These works are similar in their composition - hazy mountain and cloud scapes become the backdrop for a tree in the foreground, which is the focus of the image. These works were more typical of Phillips's production, and for MacKay recalled the long tradition of tree iconography - the symbolic use of the tree in landscape painting.⁸

Born and trained in Britain before moving to Winnipeg in 1913, Phillips grew up with the Romantic tradition of English landscape painting. This movement was characterized by a desire to look to nature for emotional inspiration in the creation of art, and encouraged the representation of landscapes unfettered by humankind. This way of perceiving the land, and the role of art was shared by Phillips: "The beauty and wonders of Nature are as alluring as the pursuit of Art ... and made of me a landscape painter."⁹ Sensitive to atmosphere and colour, Phillips's work recalled the Romantic tradition and its emphasis on the representation of "...serenity, tranquillity ... and the beauty of nature to be discovered when nature was in repose."¹⁰

MacKay's work has been referred to as a *bridge between our culture past and present*.¹¹ MacKay is aware of these philosophical concerns represented by Phillips's work, but departs from this premise and in his work pursues other avenues of enquiry. While these works selected by MacKay reflect Phillips's ongoing interest in a more romantic representation of nature, it is Phillips's images that are at the heart of MacKay's exploration, not nature itself.

Unlike Phillips, MacKay is not a printmaker, and indeed only considers himself a painter "by quotation."¹² The body of work which was created in response to Phillips includes numerous sketches on manila paper, a video, and a wall drawing. The sketches are created using various media, including tracing paper, damar varnish, Paraffin wax, pencil, and pastel. A single image by Phillips is reworked, over and over, in sketch after sketch, each work being at once a different representation of the same image. MacKay paints the wax onto the sketches, making the painterly quality of the works, and therefore the process of creation, overt.



Allan Harding MacKay
Untitled [Vapours], 1998
 paper



Allan Harding MacKay,
Untitled [Howe Sound], 1998
wax, charcoal on paper

In some cases he uses layer after layer of photocopied images of Phillips's works, while in others creates what he refers to as "scroll" pieces, that have tracing paper carefully placed on the image and then partially rolled away, as if simultaneously revealing and concealing the image to and from its viewers.

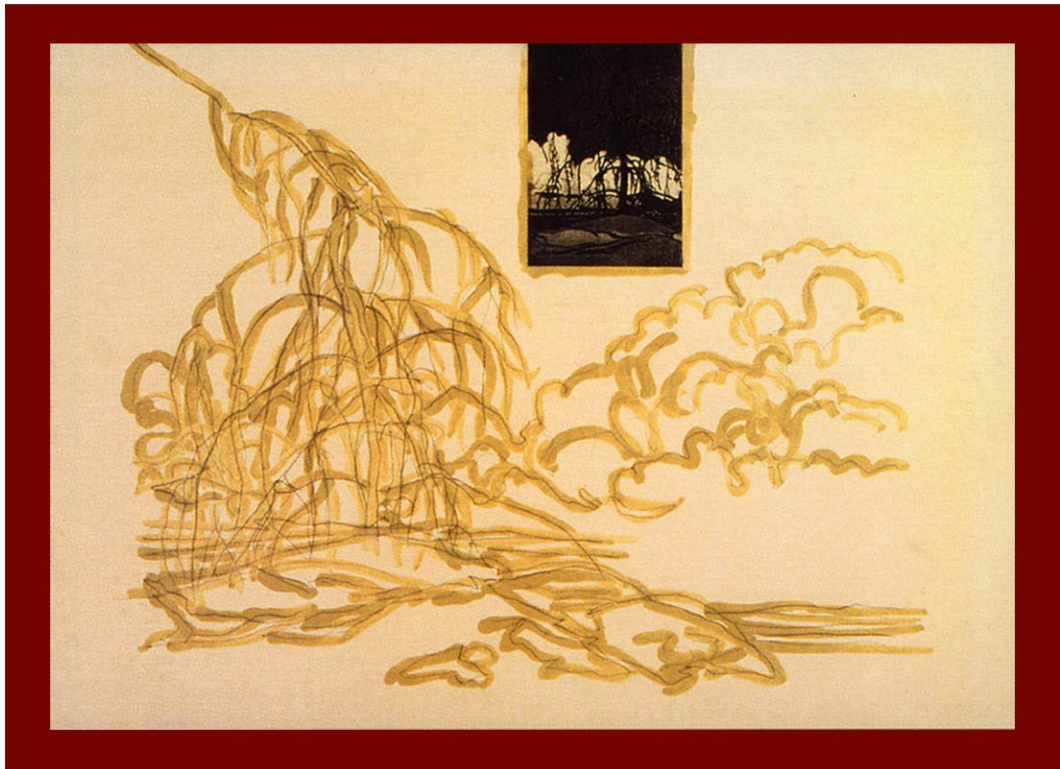
In a way, MacKay's sketches are about how things appear. MacKay focuses the attention of the viewer by revealing only that which he wants the viewer to see, and in so doing implies the presence of the viewer who, in turn, becomes self-conscious about the act of viewing and what that can contain. These works are also about the history of MacKay's own looking, spending the time to look at the work of others before him. They also refer to his own history of picture making, an endeavour which spans three decades. By rendering overt the act of creating and looking at the landscape, MacKay illuminates the process by which certain landscapes can play a symbolic role in the formation of national identity.

The creation of the video installation *An Icon for the Independent Spirit* began before MacKay started this particular *Source/Derivations* project. MacKay developed this piece by manipulating footage he shot of a lone pine he discovered at Bow Falls. MacKay recalls that, "While walking along the winding upper path of the rock face that guides this particular passage of the Bow River and its Falls, my attention was directed to the location of a single pine that by all appearances was growing almost perpendicularly from the face of the rock. My attraction to its zsingularity became both aesthetic and metaphoric. The motionless (relatively speaking, acknowledging the imperceptible process of its growth and maturing over the years and the constancy of breezes bending its bows) in contradistinction to the ever present motion of liquid movement and sound."¹³



Walter J. Phillips,
The Vapours Round the Mountain Curled, 1938
woodcut on paper
Glenbow Collection.

Working with the footage, MacKay realized that he had embarked on a "contemporary Walter J. Phillips project" and began thinking about the video piece in relation to his interest in Phillips. The outcome is a contemporary video installation which resonates with the interest in the landscape icon of the tree that MacKay shares with Phillips. MacKay's piece asks us to consider our perception of the landscape not just visually, but through sound. Depicting a lone pine backgrounded by the Bow River and Falls, the video, like the sketches, has a painterly quality, and recalls the blues, greys, and greens used by Phillips in his mountain scapes.



Allan Harding MacKay,
Untitled [Jack Pine], 1998
wax, pencil, reprography on paper

The sound component of the video was composed by Richard MacDowell, resident composer with One Yellow Rabbit Performance Theatre. Using the "natural" sounds of the rushing falls recorded seasonally in the original footage, MacDowell has created a composition that combines the sounds of orchestrated music, sounds of the elements, human voice, and wind instruments, particularly the Japanese flute. The fusion of such sounds is reminiscent of the various influences on Phillips's own practice, for not only did Phillips receive training in landscape painting in Britain, but he also received training in the art of the woodcut by Japanese master printmaker Yoshirigi Urushibara.



Allan Harding MacKay
An Icon for the Independent Spirit, 1998
 video still

The video installation comments on the timeless nature of the image it depicts - the tree and Bow Falls - and yet also pushes us to question that representation. Using technology, MacKay has reworked the familiar image of Bow Falls into something quite unfamiliar, perhaps even enigmatic. The sound component is based on the natural sounds of the Falls, but these no longer sound "natural." And the image that many of us may have in our mind of the Bow Falls, an image that has been represented in tourism brochures and visitors' snapshots for over a century, is distorted beyond any prescribed reference to that place.

MacKay has described the tree image as "An icon for the independent spirit, framed by the fluid insistence of descending falls that has served the single pine as a constant and torrential neighbour for more than 3000 moons. The Fixed framed by Flow, a nuance in a dance with the cataclysm."¹⁴ This - description of the tree and its surroundings as one everlasting entity evokes references to MacKay's interest in Daoist philosophy, and the idea that humanity is but one small component of the natural world. "Landscape," then, is not something inherently separate from who we are. Indeed MacKay's sketches, with their calligraphy-like brushwork, monochromatic tones, and (in the case of some) Chinese characters, also point to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting which represents nature not as a place or a view, but rather as a cosmos, one in which human beings play a rather insignificant part.¹⁵



Allan Harding MacKay
Source/Derivations VI (Howe Sound),
 1998
 wax, oil, reprography on paper

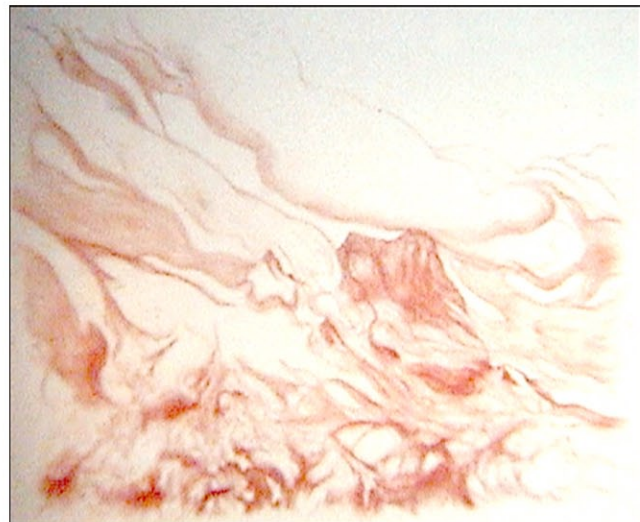


Allan Harding MacKay,
Source/Derivations VI, 1998
mixed media

MacKay's work, with its complex references to alternative ways of looking at the landscape, highlights the notion that "nature" is not a state or a thing that exists, but is rather a culturally-produced concept. This exploration of Phillips's work suggests that the depiction of the landscape is by no means universal, but rather a process by which social identities are formed. The representation of the landscape has a long tradition in the history of art, and has been linked to the development of imperial interests and national identity in such diverse contexts as England and China. In Canada, landscape has been one of the most dominant modes of art in the history of Canadian painting. The work of such artists as the Group of Seven, contemporaries of Phillips, established a form of landscape painting that represented a certain kind of Canadian nationhood. Landscape as a medium has been bound up in questions of colonialism, exploration, tourism, and national identity. It is "a material means, like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic form capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values."¹⁶

This project contributes to our reflections of past, present, and future struggles of a society and culture seeking alternative relationships to the environment we inhabit. MacKay's work asks us to question how we perceive the land and the ways in which our culture mediates the perception. The artist's explorations coincide with a poignant time in the history of Banff National Park as the Federal Government attempts a balancing act to manage natural ecological forces with human (often contaminant) interventions - to protect these sites as "pure" spaces and "free space for our collective imaginations."

Kirsten Evenden, Art Curator



Allan Harding MacKay, *Source/Derivations VI*, 1998
red chalk wall drawing

- 1 Perugino of the Chapterhouse of Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, referring to the Umbrian landscape. Christopher Tunnard, *A World with a View. An Inquiry into the Nature of Scenic Values*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1978), 41.
- 2 *Source/Derivations: An Installation by Allan Harding MacKay* was inspired by Tom Thomson's Northern River; Ottawa School of Art, Feb. 14-Mar 9, 1989. *Source/Derivations II* responded to Lauren Harris's *Isolation Peak*; Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, Jan. 6-Feb. 2, 1992. *Source/Derivations III* was based on Ron Benner's *As Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend Laid*; Art Gallery of Windsor, Jan. 22-Mar 13, 1994. *Source/Derivations IV* responded to the sculpture *Balzac* by Auguste Rodin, at the Edmonton Art Gallery, Sept. 3-Oct. 30, 1995. *Source/Derivations V* ... examined *The Head* by Edwin Holgate, at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Feb. 1-Apr. 27, 1997.
- 3 Glenbow has over 600 works by Walter J. Phillips, the most extensive collection of its kind in Canada.
- 4 Harding MacKay to author, May 14, 1998.
- 5 Harding MacKay to author, July 10, 1998.
- 6 For more information on Walter J. Phillips's work see: Ed Maria Tippet and Douglas Cole, *Phillips in Print-The Selected Writings of Walter J. Phillips on Canadian Nature And Art* (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1982); Roger Boulet, *The Tranquility and the Turbulence* (Markham, Ontario: M.B. Loates Publishing, 1981); Michael Gribbon, *Walter J. Phillips: A Selection of his Works and Thoughts* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, National Museums of Canada, 1978).
- 7 Harding MacKay to author, May 14, 1998.
- 8 For a discussion of the use of the tree in landscape painting see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto, Random House, 1995).
- 9 Maria Tippet and Douglas Cole, *From Desolation to Splendour - Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (Toronto, Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Co., Ltd., 1977) 13.
- 10 Ibid, 16.
- 11 Linda Genereux, "Allan Harding MacKay, University of Toronto," *ArtForum*, May 1992, 125.
- 12 Harding MacKay to author, July 10, 1998.
- 13 Artist's Statement, August 5, 1998.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Hugo Munsterberg, *Art of the Far East* (New York/London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc), 145.
- 16 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press), 14.

