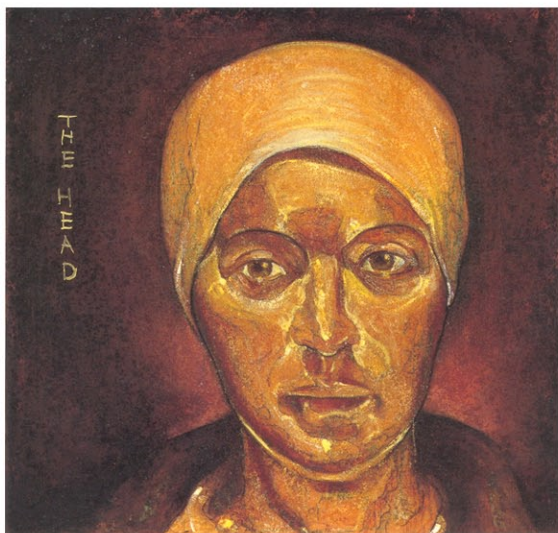


SOURCE/DERIVATIONS V (Edwin Holgate)



Allan Harding MacKay, *The Head*, 1996
oil, wax, pastel on panel

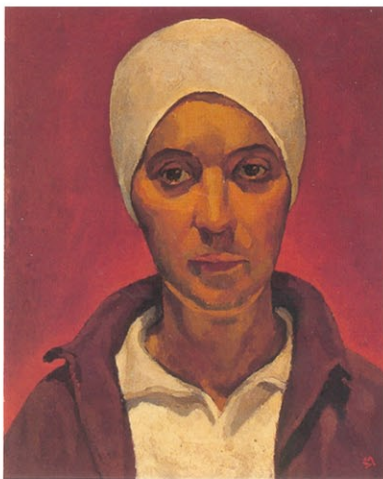


Allan Harding MacKay,
*Borrow a Corpse for the
Souls Return*, 1996
oil, wax, charcoal on panel,
acetate overlay

Allan Harding MacKay is an artist whose deep visceral reactions to images, whether found in art or in life, are the catalysts for his artistic practice. The artworks in *Source/Derivations V* ...were inspired in part by MacKay's encounter with Edwin Holgate's painting - *The Head*, 1938, which is in the permanent collection of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. Equally, the exhibition's content was driven by MacKay's attraction to portraiture in a more general sense, and by his fascination with women wearing any kind of head covering. Interwoven with these emotional triggers are the many conceptual avenues the artist explores while developing a complete installation. It was during his studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax that MacKay was first introduced to conceptual art. The weight given to the processing of ideas and information in the making of art intrigued him. This dual fascination with technique and concepts is at the heart of MacKay's *Source/Derivations V* ... exhibition.

The artist's interest in investigating these dualities has in fact been the basis of his entire *Source/Derivations* series.¹ In each site-specific installation, a "source" artwork, which has deeply moved MacKay, is an integral part of the exhibition along with MacKay's own artworks exploring different manipulations of its subject and media. Consequently, MacKay effectively positions himself at the centre of a theoretical and practical dialogue between himself, as a contemporary artist, and history. The dialogue not only contextualizes the history of the source artwork but also opens questions on the notions of subject and representation.

E. H. Holgate's *The Head* caught MacKay's attention for several reasons. The figural work of the Group of Seven artists has always intrigued him, not least because this body of work is less well known than their landscapes. In contrast to the other Group members, Holgate has always been better known for his portraits and paintings of figures in the landscape, usually rendered with a limited palette and an emphasis on "structure and form."²



Edwin Holgate 1892-1977, *The Head*, 1938
Collection: McMichael Canadian Art Collection



Installation details:
Allan Harding MacKay
Source/Derivations V, 1997
oil, wax, pastel on paper

Similarly, portraiture and figural works have frequently appeared in MacKay's own artistic practice over the years. Holgate's portrait of his wife, Frances, struck MacKay as a "strong painting in its own right," its "frontal qualities" were appealing, and he found it unusual "in the sense of the figure having a head piece on."³ Holgate and his wife had been cementing a patio and Frances had wrapped a towel around her long hair while she worked. It was in this garb that Holgate recorded her image on canvas.⁴

In 1976, the Holgates made a memorial donation of *The Head* - a painting considered an important turning point in his artistic development - to the McMichael. In that same year the National Gallery of Canada mounted a major retrospective of Holgate's work. The curator, Dennis Reid, positioned *The Head* in Holgate's development as follows:

*Then, early in 1938, a portrait of his wife Frances began to stray from likeness as he found himself engaged by an intense awareness of the actual physical activity of laying in paint. Head, as Holgate calls it (insisting that it is not a portrait), is probably the single work that best summarizes Holgate's concerns as a painter. Every detail speaks of subtlety (notice the point of the collar over the right shoulder), every form is sensitively built up, and naturally, pleasingly melds into its neighbours to form a modulated, tactile surface of quiet liveliness, The structure of the face - emphasized by contrast with the simple white kerchief - is convincing as grown bone and flesh, yet eloquently expresses the capacity of oil paint to suggest the range of human spirit.*⁵



Allan Harding MacKay, *Untitled*, 1996
charcoal, pastel on paper

Over the past decade or more, portraiture has appeared in many of MacKay's drawings and paintings, beginning with those of his first wife who frequently wore scarves. Then, while living in Switzerland from 1983 to 1988, the artist's interest in the traditions of landscape and portrait painting was regenerated. One such body of his work was a series based on the paintings of the Swiss modernist Ferdinand Hodler. Fully aware that both landscape and portraiture were passé among contemporary artists, MacKay brought to both genres a fusion of his superb technical skills and his interest in conceptual notions of art. Painting in a style reminiscent of Hodler, MacKay whimsically included his own images alongside Hodler's, setting up parallels in subject and technique.

In 1993, while serving as an official war artist in Somalia, MacKay did numerous drawings of many women with head coverings. More recently, his subjects have included Christian women in wimples, his studies taken from Egyptian tomb paintings, and references to media images, such as the mother of one of the accused bombers of the World Trade Centre in New York. MacKay's deconstructive approach to these works takes the form of analysis and makes reference to both historical and contemporary imagery, thus contextualizing his creative process.



Installation view: McMichael Canadian Art Collection

In *Source/Derivations V* . . . MacKay closely examines the subject matter and technique used by Holgate in *The Head*. Equally important is MacKay's toying parody of the accoutrements-creative process, materials and technique traditionally associated with portraiture. His combination of influences-graphic realism, conceptual art and artworld politics-allows him to challenge this tradition and invert the essentials in his deconstruction of the face.⁶ Usually an artist will produce a number of sketches, or studies, based on the subject or model. It is from these sketches that the artist eventually produces a finished work. Here, MacKay's approach is the reverse. He first produced the large panel, *The Head* 1996 followed by numerous sketches. He sometimes worked from a model; at others, he worked directly from slide projections of Holgate's image.

Parody is also reflected in MacKay's choice of materials. He eschews traditional oil on canvas, preferring brown industrial paper or panels of the paper-covered plywood usually used by sign painters. It could be argued that, just as artists have done for centuries, MacKay builds up his paint surface in layers. In *The Head* the artist achieves the technical and textural quality of paint on canvas by layering and scraping back into the surface of his work with a variety of media. "I really don't use a formula. I do a drawing-charcoal and pastel-then I just flick the melted wax and Damar varnish. I don't brush it on. The reason for that is to get a space in between where the raw pastel is contrasted with the richness of the mix. So that builds up the texture of the surface."⁷



Installation view: McMichael Canadian Art Collection

1 *Source/Derivations*.- An installation by Allan Harding MacKay was inspired by Tom Thomson's *Northern River*. Ottawa School of Art, February 14 to March 4, 1989. *Source/Derivations* 11 included Lawren Harris' *Isolation Peak*. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, January 6 to February 2, 1992. *Source/Derivations* III was based on Ron Benner's *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*. Art Gallery of Windsor, January 22 to March 13, 1994. *Source/Derivations* IV used the sculpture *Balzac* by Auguste Rodin. Edmonton Art Gallery, September 3 to October 30, 1995.

2 Charles Hill, *Canadian Paintings in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada 1975), 42.

3 Personal interview, August 12, 1996.

4 Robert McMichael, *One Man's Obsession* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada 1986), 218-219.

5 Dennis Reid, *Edwin Holgate* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada 1976), 21.

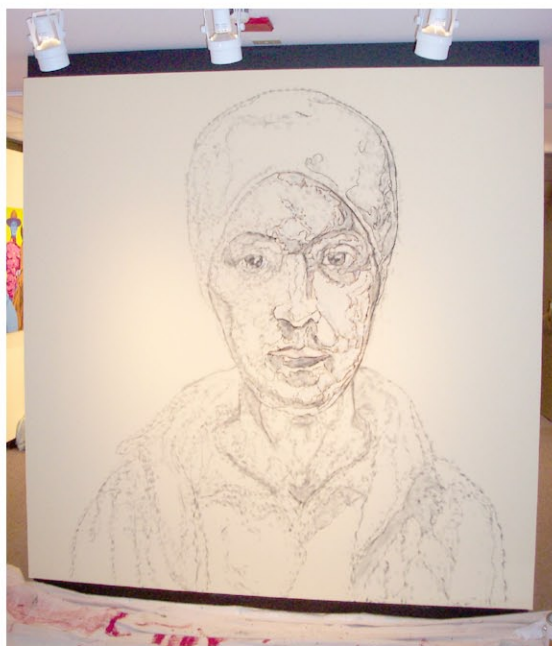
6 Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *SOME CRITICAL COUNTENANCES: An Extended Drawing* (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia 1989), 66.

7 Personal interview, August 21, 1996.

MacKay's interest in form and structure-an interest shared with Holgate-is revealed through his deconstruction of the portrait, not least because of its gigantic size. His larger than life portraits emphasize the quality of technique and the reality of reproduction. The panel, *Outside/Inside Head* depicts a human skull. A large sheet of acetate, bearing a copy of Holgate's painting on the surface, overlays the skull. The eyes of Holgate's work rest inside the sockets of MacKay's skull, creating the illusion that it is the skull that is veiling the head. Through his use of reprography, black-and-white photographs, and colour transparencies, MacKay plays with this notion of illusion, questioning the relationship between original and copy. His use of technology to reproduce imagery also questions the conceptual ideas of conventional portraiture. Traditionally, portraiture was a commissioned work and a laborious task of documenting an exact likeness of the subject. It has only been within the past 100 years that portraiture through a mechanical means has been accepted. Even today, 'official' portraits resort back to renderings in oil on canvas.

Whether to frame works or to merely pin them to the wall is not just an aesthetic decision for MacKay. He also considers the psychological effects of framed and unframed works. In this exhibition, the artist's large panels are placed on a shelf and lean against the wall. This type of installation gives some of the works a less traditional sense of completion, again making reference to MacKay's creative process. Original or representation? Ultimately, *Source/Derivations V* . . . is about both.

Susan Gustavison and Lynn Hill
Exhibition Curators



February 2004, Allan Harding MacKay
Site-specific drawing from 'The Head' for the
McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

174 THE IMAGE "Borrow a Corpse for the Soul's Return" (the actual title borrowed from a text of Chinese strategems), is composed of a 4' x 4' skull drawing in yellow pastel, and wax on a paper-covered panel. In addition, a transparent acetate overlay containing the grey tone reproduction of Edwin Holgate's 1938 oil painting entitled, "The Head."

Although the skull is positioned behind the "fleshed" out representation of Holgate's original portrait, a paradoxical illusion is created, in that the skull advances and the eyes appear to be peering from behind the skull; in effect the outside becomes inside looking out. A macabre presence for a yet to be claimed anatomical metaphor, (paradox) perhaps?

— Allan Harding MacKay

Allan Harding MacKay

Borrow a Corpse for the Soul's Return

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Photo: Isaac Applebaum

