

**SHEER AND SOLID GROUND: SELINA & THE HORSE RESCUE**

T. E. Hardy



Not as we are but as we must appear,  
Contractual ghosts of pity; not as we  
Desire life but as they would have us live,  
Set apart in timeless colloquy.

Geoffrey Hill: *Funeral Music*

**SHEER AND SOLID GROUND: SELINA & THE HORSE RESCUE**

T. E. Hardy











## SHEER AND SOLID GROUND: SELINA & THE HORSE RESCUE

T. E. Hardy

*SELINA & THE HORSE RESCUE* is an intrigue, a dramatic double-event. This beguiling title of Allan Harding MacKay's installation instantaneously conjures symbolic drama, a drama located solidly, we are told by the press release, in fact: "Selina Martin, the subject for the portraits, is a Toronto musician/composer. The Horse Rescue works are based on an image from the Toronto Star newspaper, found at a coffee shop and re-photographed as a source for the finished works."

This certainty of beginnings ineluctably leads to a great uncertainty of ends. The capacity of the selected images to rely on their own status as fact disintegrates; they are subsumed by a psychological contortion and an imaginative anxiety that results from the manner in which these specific disparate images collide, abandoned as they are transposed from one context to another: studio image and found image enlarged and modified and juxtaposed.

We encounter in this installation the core mechanics of the creative act wherein one subject is figuratively transposed by being associated with another. Reading this work we consult it as such and become aware of the staging of a narrative experiment. The atmosphere is one of distress: yes, a body is being rescued; and no, the beholder is located elsewhere (us/'Selina'). Well-being, sanity, and the merging of imagery struggle like the horse, within the fiction.



above: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie installation. 2014

left: Selina 4 mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper). 2012







Selina is in a dream; whose dream we cannot tell. She is naked; the compositions stark; grainy reduced palettes of color portray her in heavy shadow and textured light. She is hesitant, anguished, and watches something or for something, a force she symbolizes that in turn defines her. What is this force? The demands of narrative or perhaps what she seeks to verify in the fourth portrait where eye contact is established with us. We are all in a set-up and it feels uncomfortable; we are “not as we are but as we must appear,” symbolically summoned, conditioned by uncertain needs. Selina may pose as *Selina*; may rescue herself.

The pervasive trouble MacKay’s installation engages is acutely figured in the conjunction ‘and’ – what links *Selina* to *The Horse Rescue* and us to them, art and existence. Each element is fielded as a semantic component (the hand of divinity too, cropped in the upper-left corner of the *Horse Rescue* paintings), and all components oscillate to form a disjunctive shape. This shape is the gallery space we as viewers traverse. Our disorientation as we work to comprehend the imagery enables us to physically sense this space: the floor as ground and the walls as sheer image. Our passage as we cross from piece to piece to read and combine the images is symbolic, and our performance as viewers becomes our act. We are composed as types over individuals with unique needs. MacKay is thereby objectifying narrative to figure it out, to experiment, and with significant conceptual angst.



above: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie installation. 2014

left: *Selina 3 mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012



And underwrites and exhorts us, capturing as sure as the unforeseen trap the horse is in, the universal mode of contiguity that does not require the reasoning or explanation a metaphor or law must provide. The story here is of juxtaposition and collision and help. Our holding of *Selina & The Horse Rescue* in our mind's-eye is fraught with accident. Authorship too is trapped as MacKay presents graphically and disconcertingly what he intuits before what he knows: why Selina encounters the horse rescue. We too seem to stumble upon the work as surviving artifacts we subsequently wish to renew.

'Selina' hovers over this event for us as a myth, as Cumaean Sibyl. Our metaphysical blueprint categorizes the horse as sacrificial and our active reading as an iconic act of prayer. But this drama is out of our control. There is pathos but what does it seek? A return to what? The nexus of uncertain visual relationships is where our interpretative faculties falter. This ground is unstable. The elements dig in to their transience making sharp a mirage linguistically hinged by the conjunction 'and'.

MacKay renders his work through the language of conventional figurative and narrative painting. The surfaces articulate an awareness of their own historicity. What seem smooth are in fact rough, mottled surfaces that express visual distress and doubt. The work may insist rhetorically on pictorial conventions but it does so questionably. The artist's decision to model Selina calls on her as a character to reassure the practice of portraiture. But which



above: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie installation. 2014

left: *Selina 2 mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper).* 2012







Selina? The real Selina, introduced on Shannon Skinner's "Extraordinary Women TV" show as an "art-rock siren" or, *Selina* actualized in the painting as palimpsest, Selina's paraphrased identity, rescuer, aesthetic symbol and muse? Mythical subject-hood abounds, those "contractual ghosts of pity" we embrace fantastically to survive, embrace to see ourselves reach resolution in narrative. How can we be intelligent among our stock of disparate imagery? Our use of symbols as they use us is one of the great antinomical relationships MacKay activates.

MacKay is keenly cognizant of how disjunctive a correlated and fabricated body of imagery is: Selina's portraits, paintings of the horse rescue, and the video of Selina. Disjunction is the strange, forced bond of unity, the lure of attachment and disposability. It creates syntax. It is meaning that is being rescued – frequent shorthand for the afterlife. Boundaries, as bureaucrats of reality that circumscribed our acts of looking, always bend as the images themselves alter, taken from one location to another. This clash of visual perimeters has a notable influence in MacKay's career: he served as war-artist on contract to the Canadian Armed Forces in Somalia (1993) and Afghanistan (2002). The art produced from these assignments entered a complex network of interests to become metonyms for them, just as Selina's eyes shifting from side to side in the video and in the portraits are agents of illimitable seeing. The shifting of reproductions from one place (Afghanistan) to another (Canada) entails shock, and MacKay dealt

above: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie installation. 2014

left: *Selina 1 mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper).* 2012





Horse Rescue 1 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper). 2012*



with the violence of the unexpected by destroying some of this work outside Parliament buildings in Ottawa to protest the Conservative Government's policies in 2012. There is no drawing of red lines around our eyes is a political belief MacKay defends.

Context for MacKay is a broad space made eventful by successive acts of deconstruction/destruction, and reconstruction/restitution. The paintings and the video occupy terrain as targets, perhaps as fetishes, perhaps as surrogates for illusions one cannot confront. *Selina & The Horse Rescue* does countenance ideas of alienation, and disconnected consciousness and implodes with them. The elements fall against and into each other, into the stasis of a perpetual sinking. 'Selina' can expect nothing and everything to change. MacKay illuminates this ontological strife with chiaroscuro emblematic of pathos, and fights with it, as the horse fights. In an older work *Critical Countenances* (1989), which consists of a 545-foot scroll of portraits of Canadian art-world personas, MacKay did not settle for the inert status the work achieved. He shredded the scroll returning it to raw fact and exhibited the bags of paper, exalting them with a prankster's touch to sit in the gallery-space as endgame props – a 'critical' circularity indeed. Do *Selina* and *The Horse Rescue* revolve endlessly around each other, "set apart in timeless colloquy" – or become the dialogue we can provide, that provides the difference?

That context always begets creative difficulty is a tenet of MacKay's oeuvre. This show is a focused, dramatic representation of this. Does art it asks, like the horse, emerge from a legend of mud, from materials, as the figure of a rebirth? Does it rather represent the flaws, and the flow, of what we even helplessly decide on, and choose as subjects for existence, subjects we correlate? Art, this work suggests, is also that we flee from "with naked foot stalking" (Thomas Wyatt).

MacKay was educated in traditional 19th-century painting techniques. This has with a measure of irony made him a capable agent negotiating certain anti-painting axioms of postmodern culture, those pitched against the metaphysical in art. MacKay's utilization of conventional painterly means is symptomatic of a yearning for this mystery, or simply a desire for an uncomplicated elegance – which would hazard a new set of problems. He does allow unbridled visual lyricism, although executed, as observed, to produce a finish more of stress than of durance. The tone of the painting is serious, urgent: endangered horse and alarmed watchfulness. Indeed 'Selina' models the trace-image of the pre-modern soul.

MacKay does not so much use the photograph as a template as absorb it into the 'other' medium of paint. Painting (the cough that just won't go away, as a critic recently quipped) is still, to many, a dubious medium. He engages this doubt thematically (the semantic schism between the



Horse Rescue 2 mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper). 2012

images), and materially (the photograph merged with paint). The reproduced image becomes the original. In a sense, this is working against technological developments in time and is an act of recuperation, of a re-synchronizing of the subject portrayed with the expressive capacities of the medium. To this end there is no technical or visual argument between photographic source and painterly result: both accommodate each other formerly; and MacKay's application of charcoal, chalk and oil pastel, wax, varnish and oil washes, over the photographic ink jet on paper ground, marks out a style. What this style signifies is transition, and towards this place of change the lens and the hand have been willed to act in unison, to outline broken narratives, indeed to rescue the appearance of narrative so as to re-engage its potentialities. The style becomes a ploy en route, after the fact you might say, and before the fiction that negates its technique of renewal because the style at this stage would be a harbinger of a previous aesthetic. This issue of style working against the grain of vision is an essential one and remains unresolved. It is as if to ask MacKay to unpaint the problems. For now the assured manner of the facture: scumbling, impasto and splashes of wax, are a foil for the paintings themes of anguish and stress. And the mottled surfaces also remind the eye of the deterioration of old photographs, and bring to the surface the question of resonance.

These are an unsettled group of portraits and depict uncertain identity with illusionistic menace, a trompe l'oeil effect where photograph and painting switch off. But the painterly gleam of presence is impossible for us as historicized viewers to consider with belief. The portraits suffused with tonal effects of light and bereaved expressions exude romantic melancholia, and the horse rescue paintings function as metonyms for allegorical genre painting. The exhibition's visual representation of crisis is analogous to the early modernist crisis in the lyrical existence of the soul. 'Selina' again poses as a real character so as to connect mnemonically with pre-existing vatic myths.

Left alone these loaded images of pathos would be outlandish: hence the gap between 'Selina' and 'the Horse Rescue'. We need this problematic conjunction, and we need the effect of the video *Selina Oboe Glass* that causes further turbulence in the space. Here the artist's hand moves a bottle back and forth between the lens and the subject so as to distort the image. Strains of dissonant samples taken of the oboe create further tension. The hand is enacting an effacing gesture, drawing a semblance of transparent meaning through the membrane of space, expressing ontological ambivalence.

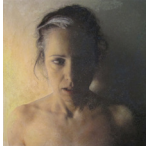
*Selina & The Horse Rescue* is about struggle and the modification of images. It does not create a new practice or cancel an older one but negotiate the space between. This is not easy. After protracted time the beholder feels the need to escape...



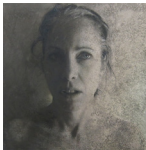


Selina Oboe Glass *video still*, 2013

## List of Works



Selina 1 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
4w x 4h feet



Selina 2 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
4w x 4h feet



Selina 3 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
4w x 4h feet



Selina 4 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
4w x 4h feet



Horse Rescue 1 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
8w x 4h feet



Horse Rescue 2 *mixed media (charcoal, oil and chalk pastel, oil wash and ink jet on paper)*. 2012  
8w x 4h feet



Selina Oboe Glass *video*. 2013  
17min

Art Gallery of Grande Prairie *Grande Prairie, Alberta*  
April 17 - July 6, 2014

Museum of Contemporary Art Calgary *Calgary, Alberta*  
November 30, 2013 - February 2, 2014

The exhibition is comprised of 6 large format mixed media works done in the artist's signature style of literal imagery executed in oil and chalk pastels, oil wash and ink jet on paper. Combining works from two separate bodies of work creates a narrative that poses the question of the relationship between the portrait subject and the grand scale drama of images of an actual horse rescue, artistically developed from a source newspaper image.

Included in the exhibition is a video/sound work that examines the portrait subject Selina in a series of short video clips in real time and slow motion, distorted by the reflections of a glass bottle placed in the foreground. The sound track featuring an oboe and various musics was composed from sampling internet sources.

Selina Martin, the subject for the portraits, is a Toronto musician/composer. The Horse Rescue works are based on an image from the Toronto Star newspaper, found at a coffee shop and rephotographed as a source for the finished works.

*Organized in conjunction with the The Art Gallery of Grande Prairie and the Museum of Contemporary Art (Calgary) with the generous assistance and support of Jarvis Hall Fine Art.*