



ALLAN HARDING MACKAY



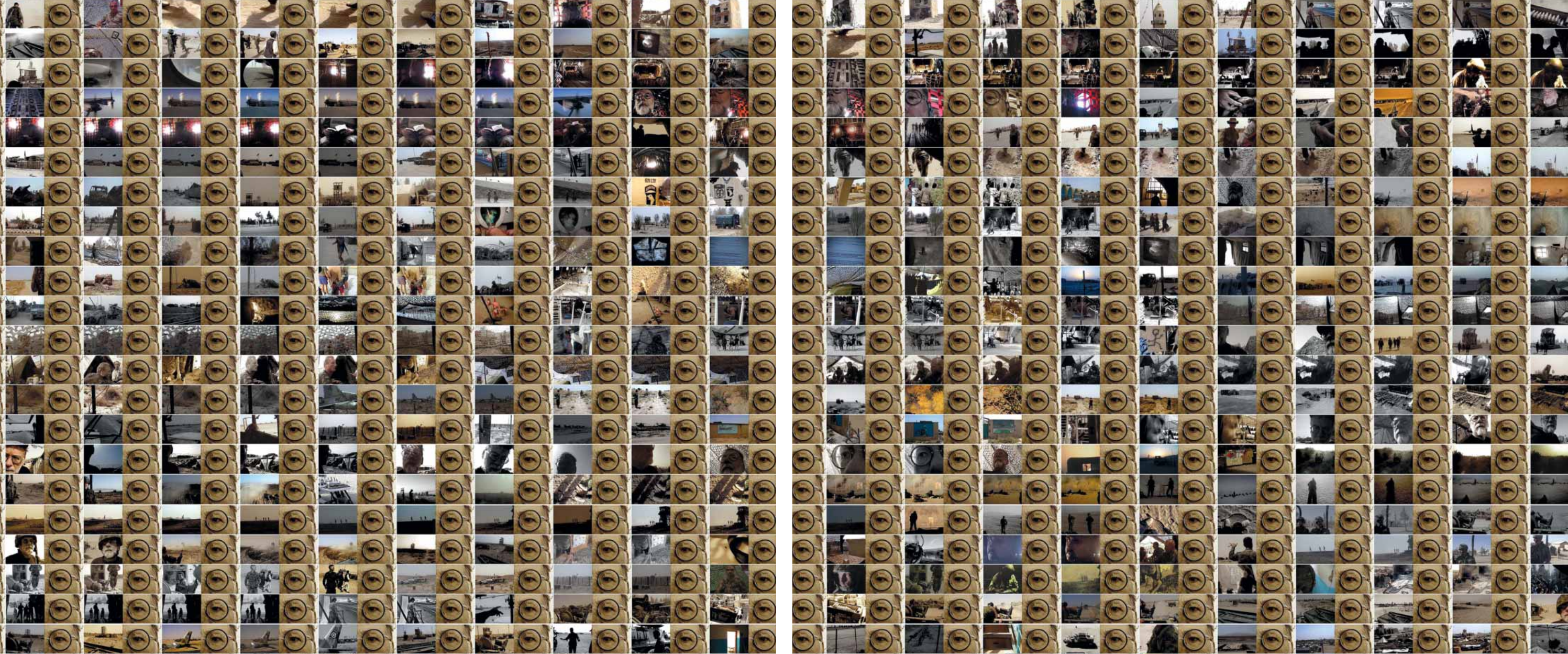
DOUBLE BIND

DOUBLE

Allan Harding MacKay

BIND





double bind (*n.*): A situation in which a person must choose between equally unsatisfactory alternatives; a punishing and inescapable dilemma.

When confronted with two conflicting demands in which neither can be ignored—what do you do?

Definition from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

Wilfrid Laurier
University



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Foreword



AFTER MANY SUCCESSFUL years of presenting exhibitions that reflect contemporary Canadian art, the Robert Langen Art Gallery has adopted a slightly new and unique direction with its programming. While continuing its commitment as a public visual arts centre, the gallery is now teaming with members of the academic community at Wilfrid Laurier University to explore visual art in its aesthetic, historical, social, economic and political contexts by presenting exhibitions that reflect topics in the university's academic curriculum.

Allan Harding MacKay's *Double Bind* reflects this new focus, and proves, without a doubt, that the integration of art into the academic curriculum is a significant component of a liberal arts education. In July 2002, MacKay participated in a pilot project of the Canadian Forces Artist Program as a war

artist with Operation Apollo in Afghanistan. In this exhibition, MacKay presents a selection of powerful images that documents the operation like an archaeological dig, uncovering the ruins and cultural history of a country continually ripped apart by war. MacKay offers our students, faculty and staff, as well as the community at large, a personal glimpse into a world that most of us can only begin to understand through the media. His visuals bring us realistically close to a somber irony, as they depict a surface order of uncertainty while the country catches its breath in anticipation of the next cataclysm.

On behalf of Wilfrid Laurier University and the Robert Langen Art Gallery, I would like to sincerely thank award-winning novelist Camilla Gibb for creating a fictional piece, inspired by MacKay's images, that captures the inner conflict that comes with being "an observer". A special thank you to Terry Copp, Director of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, for providing an introduction that defines the historical role of the Canadian war artist. I am very grateful to Dr. Derek Hall, Department of Political Science, for his enthusiasm and willingness to bring this work into his course of study. And to Kathe Gray of

electric pear—thank you for designing a catalogue that took our vision to a new level.

This publication was generously supported by the Ontario Arts Council, Public Art Galleries Project Grant Program and received additional funding from Wilfrid Laurier University's Vice-President: Academic, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and the Academic Events Office. Our continued thanks and appreciation for this financial assistance.

Lastly, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Allan Harding MacKay for allowing us to contemplate this compelling body of work, for his thoughtful insight, and for his dedication to the development of this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue.

Suzanne Luke
Curator



The Sum of Conflicting Parts

BY CAMILLA GIBB

The interpreter

I SIT ON THE EDGE of my cot, the tent flap applauding the wind. Beyond these canvas walls there is the ka-klink of barbells falling back into place, the traffic report in Ottawa via satellite radio—an accident on the Queensway; inclement weather. A Hercules passes overhead spraying a shower of sound over this anti-oasis in the desert. It leaves a residue that tastes like metal in the mouth.

When I was recruited for this job I saw it as an opportunity to return to my country, to be part of

the work of its reclamation. But now I don't know where, or indeed what or why I am, other than, perhaps duty-bound. And failing.

The only suggestion of place is the twinkle in the dark eyes of Afghanis staring out from between the heavy bars of their temporary prison: members of the Taliban awaiting sentence; men who will soon be transported to Guantanamo Bay.

My job is to translate and record, but I seem to be losing language. The effort of euphemisms like friendly fire, soft target and infinite justice has twisted the tongue in my mouth. And there is the fact that while I am contracted to interpret the testimonies of these men newly imprisoned, I am not contracted to reply.

They look at me, look through me, and see the military that has captured them. I cannot be viewed as neutral in the eyes of these men who could have been my father's neighbours, who could be relatives of mine. The military looks back at them through me and sees jihading enemies, agents of terror. My eye has become a window between worlds, clouded over on both sides with the breath of fear and loathing.

MY PARENTS, BEING among the most educated in Kabul, had been able to flee to Canada by way of Pakistan when the Soviets invaded in 1979. They had taken what they could: two collections of Persian poetry and two children, my twin sister and me. I learned early that poetry was at least as valuable and as worth saving as a life.

Others, of course, were not so lucky: while my father established a new life for us in Canada, thousands from our country languished in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. And while the Soviets imposed their Godless communism, those who had not fled fought back in the name of Afghanistan and Islam. I grew up believing in the mujahedeen as heroes, but when from among them sprung the Taliban, we of Afghan origin were divided.

I am meant to be a scribe — neutral, apolitical, blank. I am here only by virtue of being educated in all the relevant languages, after all. But that says everything about the impossibility of my situation: I am the result of troubled history; the sum of conflicting parts.

I find myself growing cold, reptilian, blinking at the rate of once an hour — perhaps less than

that. I am contemplating the desert in desertion, imagining myself an iguana loose in the sand.

I blink once and it is night; I blink again and see the light of another day. I blink a third time and see the outlines of two men standing in the canvas frame of the doorway of my tent. I cannot make out their faces because of the blaze of white light behind them. Slowly, I sit up.

“You sick?” I hear the voice of the commanding officer ask. “What’s the matter? We’ve got a job for you.” He nudges the other man into the tent.

“Slemovkin,” says a bearded man, extending his hand. He smiles a good horizon’s worth of teeth.

“The last Jew of Afghanistan,” the commanding officer says, laughing. “You think you’ve seen everything...”

HE SEEKS TO RECLAIM what is rightfully his—a scroll that was stolen by the Taliban. He has lodged his request for inquiry with the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, which has in turn, with our embassy’s approval, brought him here to the prison where a good number of Taliban officers are being held.

It is the anomaly of him that wakes me up. Here is the last Jew of Afghanistan, quite certain this is his

country, feeling entitled to go after what is his, not the least bit lacking in the confidence to reclaim it, and believing in his government and ours to assist him.

The commanding officer is giving me the task of asking the imprisoned for any information that could help us locate this man’s scroll. I am being asked to speak.

I offer Slemovkin a seat beside me on my cot. *Tell me more about this scroll, I say. Where was it taken? When and why? What’s the story?*



The Jew

WHEN THE SOVIETS withdrew, Mr. Slemovkin was among those who returned home to Kandahar. He’d lived in exile for the 10 years of the occupation, peddling carpets in Turkmenistan, sending what he could to his wife and children in Israel.

His old neighbourhood was so damaged that he barely recognized it, though finding his way from there to the city’s only synagogue was still

as instinctive as eating. The Rabbi had fled years before, along with the rest of the congregation, but remarkably, the synagogue was, as Slemovkin discovered, still partially standing.

Once they had been 40,000 in Afghanistan, with their own shops and cemeteries and schools. By 1989 all that remained was this: a small whitewashed building with a partial roof, and the caretaker, Levi Prince, ancient and decrepit, squatting with his back pressed against a diesel stove.

"My building no longer exists," Slemovkin had said to him. "And this is all that is left of us?" He waved dismissively at the tatty woven red rug covering much of the cement floor. The only other furnishing in the room was the dimpled piece of foam against one wall that the caretaker called his bed.

"Ahh," said Levi Prince, reaching under the neck of his brown tunic and pulling out a gold key on a string. He shuffled over to a small cupboard and unlocked it with his key. He pulled out four tiny silver bells and a scroll of animal skin, which he unrolled to show Slemovkin. Handwritten verses of the Torah. Five hundred years old. "Worth," Prince had said with a wink, "over \$2 million."

"That can't be," said Slemovkin, shaking his head.

"So don't believe me," said Levi Prince, shrugging his bony shoulders.

The caretaker reluctantly passed Slemovkin a blanket that night, and settled down under his own to shiver and snore in the dark. The following morning he squinted at Slemovkin as if surprised to find him still there. He warmed his hands over the stove while boiling water and asked his visitor: "What brings you back, anyway?"

"Perhaps the same thing that makes you stay," replied Slemovkin.

The caretaker threw some leaves into the pot, leaned over it and inhaled deeply.

"Tea?" Slemovkin enquired.

"Heh," said the old man, "you could call it that. Special tea for the ladies."

THEY CAME IN BLACK and turned to the wall to lift the veils from their faces and drink the stinking brew. This was how the old man survived: taking money from desperate Muslim women who came for love potions or amulets to ward off evil spirits.

Slemovkin was disgusted. He would earn his money another way. He invested in tea leaves and

sugar and set out to charm Prince's visitors with his insistence they take some sweet tea before leaving. Then he encouraged them to make a "donation" in the name of Allah.

"You say what I do is against religion," said the caretaker, "but at least I have the dignity not to beg."

"What you do is heresy," said Slemovkin. "The Taliban would have your head."

"Are you threatening me?" Prince yelled.

"You corrupt the ladies with your quackery," said Slemovkin. "I merely encourage them to fulfil their Muslim duty and give alms."

The seeds of mutual distrust sprouted into a forest of trees laden with poison berries. But as winter howled around them and snow fell through the broken roof and Prince succumbed to an infection in the lungs, Slemovkin momentarily took pity. "Why don't you join your family in Israel?" he asked Prince. "It is too cold here for an old man. Too uncomfortable." He even offered to lend him the money for the fare.

That was when Slemovkin saw the old man's fangs for the first time. The wolf, he would call Levi Prince after that. "I knew it," Prince wheezed

through his ailing lungs. "You're trying to take the synagogue from me. I don't even believe you're a Jew."

THE TALIBAN CAME to arrest Levi Prince on charges of insulting Islam. In retaliation he alleged his accuser was running a brothel out of the synagogue. The officers found proof enough when they discovered Slemovkin charming the ladies with his sweet tea and promptly arrested him too, locking him in the same cell as the wolf. The two of them, man and beast, spent the better part of two years using what little energy they had left after being beaten with cables and rifle butts to finish each other off with insults and accusations.

They were released without notice in September of 2001. The synagogue had been ransacked in their absence. The cupboard lay wide open, but they could see no one had bothered to take the scroll. It was a moment of victory, reluctantly shared. Prince boasted to anyone who would listen that their scroll had been saved, that it was worth over \$2 million, and the fact that the Taliban had failed to see this was proof of their stupidity.

When the Taliban came shortly thereafter to

confiscate the scroll, Slemovkin blamed Prince for such boasting, while Prince charged Slemovkin with being in cahoots with the Taliban and planning on splitting the profits from its sale. Prince fell to the floor on the third day of their feud, the very day NATO forces arrived to fight the Taliban.

I have been liberated from the tyranny of the wolf, thought Slemovkin.



The spy

AFTER MUCH OF A DAY together we make our way across the dirt toward the prison. Slemovkin stops, bends, exclaims. It's the tiniest flower I have ever seen. And the most stubborn and determined. What does it feed on? How has it avoided being trampled? It's a remarkable thing. Slemovkin picks the flower and crumples it between his fat thumb and finger. He puts the seeds in the palm of my hand.

"The future of Afghanistan," he says.

I am shamed by his optimism. My out of sorts, out of body, out of place seem like indulgent privilege

by comparison; my inertia almost immoral. The glass is clearing with this new mission. The body becomes human with the possibility of recovery. I pour the seeds into my chest pocket.

SLEMOVKIN WAITS OUTSIDE. The cell is all dirty knuckles gripping the bars of a cage, tobacco-stained teeth and black eyes ablaze. A hundred men speak at once, shouting over top of one another—here is the scribe come once again to take their stories.

I ask anyone who might have information about the theft to step forward. The men fall silent. They have not heard my voice before.

Then one man pushes through the sea of shoulders toward me. "And what is there for me if I tell you," he whispers through the bars in Pashto.

"Allah will reward you for the good," I say in Arabic.

"Allah, yes, but you," he says pointing a blackened finger. "How will you reward me?" He lowers his voice and whispers: "Tell me where the troops are going next."

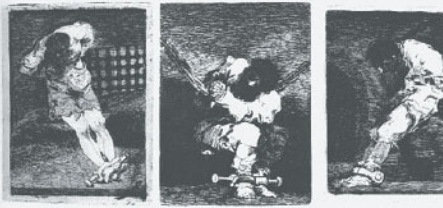
I hesitate and check my shirt pocket. I hold the future of Afghanistan against my chest. "But how do I know you really have any information," I ask.

“Omar Turyalay has the scroll. He’s in Guantanamo.”

“Panjwaye,” I whisper—information that would constitute a felony under the Official Secrets Act.

“Allahu akbar, brother,” he says, twinkling.





It's
in the breathing

Breathe

as the weapon goes up
and half way down

Breathe

squeeze the trigger

Bring on the New: Triptych

Based on images from *Disasters of War* (*Consequence*, *The Three Prisoners*, *Horrible Monster*) c 1820 by Francisco Goya 1747–1828



Whilst wretched man is still in arms for fear;
For fear he arms, and is of arms afraid;
From fear, to fear, successively betray'd.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–1680)

To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire

Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883)

And in the dust be equal made

James Shirley (1596–1666)

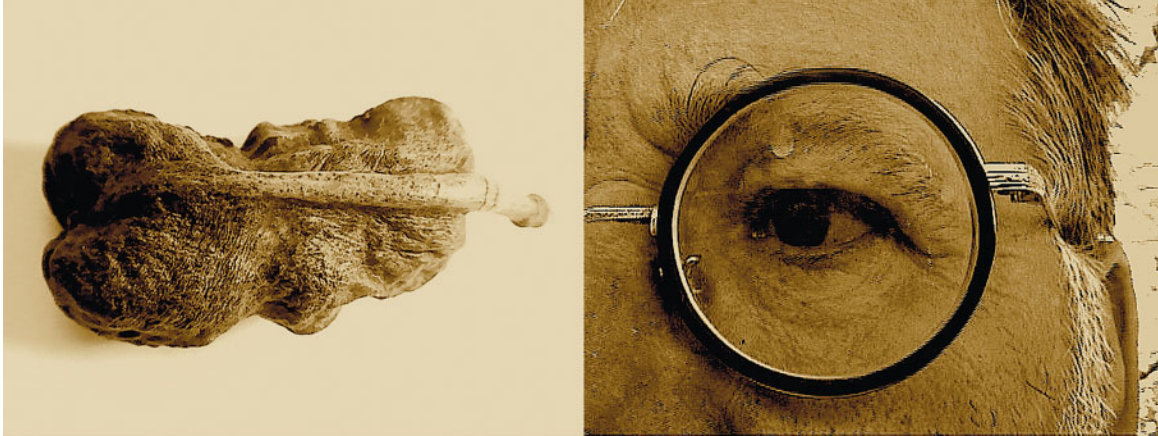
And yonder all before us lie

Deserts of vast eternity

Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982)

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)



Other

Than the soil of Afghanistan under my feet

Its silken dust in my lungs

And a bulb

Plucked from a desert flower

Placed in my vest pocket

To shrink and dry

I doubt

I was

In Afghanistan

At all



wreath

Afterword

BY TERRY COPP

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY pursued a multi-faceted career as an artist, curator and gallery director before he accepted an invitation to travel to Somalia to document the role Canadian soldiers were to play in a humanitarian aid mission. His six-day visit in March 1993 coincided with the torture and death of the Somali teenager Shidane Arone and the attempted suicide of Master Corporal Clayton Matchee. MacKay, a representational artist, did not work with a sketch pad; instead, he took a 35mm camera to serve as an image bank and a video camera as a recording device, and the scenes he captured became part of a new body of work that includes a 19-minute video, *Somalia Yellow*.

MacKay's first journey as a war artist had a profound effect on his life and work. He has described

Somalia Yellow as “a poetic and rhythmic response” to his experience, and his subsequent reworking of the material was true to this sensibility. The impact of Somalia on MacKay’s political consciousness was equally significant. When the Canadian Forces committed four CF-18 fighter-bombers to the NATO mission in the former Yugoslavia, he announced that he intended to destroy one of his Somalia images each day until “the Canadian government’s policy on the use of the military returns to the world respected and effective role of delivering humanitarian aid and peacekeeping, not bombs.” MacKay was destroying the final piece in his personal collection when the bombing stopped on 10 June 1999.

MacKay’s conflicted approach to his role as a war artist echoes the concerns of many of his predecessors. Canada’s impressive war art collection, now totalling more than 13,000 paintings, sculptures and works on paper, includes many images that portray the tragedy of human conflict rather than the glory of war. Frederic Varley’s *For What*, a 1918 canvas depicting a graveyard in the mud of the battlefields, challenged heroic views of the conflict. Varley recorded that he was “forever tainted” by the war’s “cruel drama.” His colleague, A.Y. Jackson, spoke of

the need to comment on the “stupidity of war” as well as the heroism of the soldiers.

The First World War art collection initiated by Lord Beaverbrook, a Canadian-born newspaper publisher and ardent publicist for Canada’s war effort, came to include close to on 1,000 works on a wide range of subjects. Their value in allowing Canadians to construct memories of the Great War was limited by the failure to build a memorial gallery. When war broke out in 1939, no serious thought was given to reinstating the program; instead, still and motion picture photographers were to record the war.

Once again, the intervention of a prominent, wealthy individual, Vincent Massey, Canada’s high commissioner in London, sparked a new war artist program. Beginning in 1943, Canadian artists, eventually 32 of them, lived with soldiers, sailors and airmen at home and in overseas theatres. Once again, the artists sought to meet the government’s requirement for an accurate record without abandoning their own artistic and moral vision. Alex Colville, then a very young man just developing his unique style, created a powerful image of weary soldiers in a wintry landscape (*Infantry*, 1945) that spoke of, and to, all those who fought through the last

fall and winter of the war. Jack Nichols, in paintings like *Drowning Sailor*, 1946, provided an imaginative evocation of the war at sea that is exhibited alongside more conventional scenes.

The complexity of Canada's war art was again demonstrated when the Department of National Defence cancelled the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Program that had sponsored MacKay's visit to Somalia. Overall budget cuts resulting from the much-discussed "peace dividend" were responsible and it was not until June 2001 that the war art program was restored.

It is very much to the credit of the directors of the new Canadian Forces Artists Program that Allan Harding MacKay was among the first group of artists to be employed by National Defence. In 2002, MacKay journeyed to Afghanistan, video camera in hand. Confined to the airfield compound at Kandahar, he recorded three and one half hours of video footage, which was used to make the videos and stills featured in this exhibition. MacKay is an artist who allows viewers to form their own interpretation of the meaning of his work, which is intended to engage the viewer in a dialogue about both war and art.

The Artist

A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art (1967), Allan Harding MacKay has had an award-winning career in the visual arts. He has served as Director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery (1970–75), Halifax; Southern Alberta Art Gallery (1975–79); Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon (1979–83); Art Metropole (1988–89); and The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto (1989–91).

MacKay is an active member of the arts community and has exhibited extensively throughout Canada and abroad. Exhibition venues have included: Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, Prince Edward Island; Paul Kuhn Gallery, Alberta; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia; Canadian War Museum, Ottawa; Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff; and Kunstmuseum Berne, Switzerland.

In 2006, MacKay, in collaboration with Phillips Farevaag Smallerberg Landscape Architects, unveiled the critically acclaimed Veterans Memorial commission at Queen's Park in Toronto, Ontario. A 25-year survey of the artist's work will be presented by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum in 2008.

MacKay is the curatorial consultant at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery and resides in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

Works in the Exhibition

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>observations</i>
ink jet video stills on
polyester, 4'x12', 2007 | 4. <i>be equal made</i>
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5" x 30", 2007 |
| 2. <i>arms for fear</i>
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5" x 30", 2007 | 5. <i>deserts of vast eternity</i>
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5" x 30", 2007 |
| 3. <i>sorry scheme of things</i>
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5" x 30", 2007 | 6. <i>lack all conviction</i>
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5" x 30", 2007 |

7. *other than*
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5"×30", 2007
8. *it's in the breathing*
ink jet video stills on
acrylic, text on card,
11.5"×30", 2007
9. *wreath*
ink jet on
acrylic, waxed maple
leaves, 18"×18", 2007
(52 maple leaves
from the Veterans
Memorial Ontario
Legislative Grounds)
10. *doubt*
charcoal, ink jet on
paper, 33"x 24", 2007
11. *Bring on the New:
Tryptych*
ink jet on acrylic,
13"×32", 2007
Based on images
from the *Disasters
of War (Consequence,
The Three Prisoners,
Horrible Monster)*
c 1820 by Francisco
Goya 1747–1828
12. *Afghan Vignettes: Herc,
Self Portrayal, Tally*
(15:15 min), 2006
black and white video