

A black and white photograph of a large, dense tree in a field. The tree is the central focus, with its branches and leaves filling much of the upper half of the frame. In the background, two large hay bales are visible on either side of the tree. The foreground is a field of tall grass. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

ECLOGUES
ECHOES

Alf Bogusky & Allan Harding MacKay:
A Collaboration of Echoes

ECLOGUES ECHOES

This book is a companion to the colour rendition of Eclogues. These two publications have a shared genesis through my long friendship and collegial relationship with the Artist and Arts Administrator Allan Harding MacKay. Over decades our daily conversations have explored many themes. While we came of age at different ends of the country, we share many similar values and interests. Allan's worldview, wisdom, and humour have significantly shaped my insights, and I hope to have added more than a Sancho Panza-like sidekick's witness and comic relief to his.

Allan and I share a love of art, artists, and art galleries among our many interests. We were lucky to have fallen into work in that realm which gave us such satisfying careers. With retirement, we are free to pursue our own creative endeavours. I am a hobbyist photographer. I take snapshots to record and share the things I encounter daily, an act of reverence and memory. Born on the prairies, I am particularly fond of landscapes and light conditions that change by hour, day, and season, preoccupations that continue from my current home in Guelph, Ontario. Allan continues as the artist he has always been, having returned to his East Coast roots, living in Halifax in retirement. Though we live far apart, we are still in a regular online conversation about our lives, art world activities and world events. As retired gallerists, it's only natural that we exchange images as part of our communications. A series of such exchanges over the past few years saw Allan digitally amending the snapshots I sent him. This precipitated a pattern of exchange, a free improvisational game. It soon became apparent that we'd like to share these image pairings with others, hence our decision to self-publish and distribute these books.

In addition to his usual painting, portraits and photo art projects, Allan produces online broadsheets that pillory political figures and elucidate current events. He utilizes news sources and images in the public realm, which he amends to significant effect.

As the work of successful artists will do, his creations reveal truth and beauty through an ironic or metaphorical lens. I may take photographs, but I am more of a diarist, recording the quotidian world around me so that I might remember and share these captured moments. I am particularly drawn to nature and landscape. Making my snapshots is a ritual, meditative, reflective, and spiritual activity. I use the simplest, most convenient, and most straightforward device to do this, a Samsung Galaxy Phone camera. Reflex-style film cameras consistently inhibited me; with them, I took photos that felt like they tried too hard and were too self-conscious. I treat the phone camera more like a sketchbook, removing some of my inhibitions. I rarely use filters or much digital editing, preferring to exploit the phone camera's intrinsic strengths, quirks, and limitations. I like its casual and accommodating nature. To now, I've been less interested in achieving high-fidelity resolution. However, by printing these books, I am starting to wonder about the possibilities that editing and higher fidelity equipment might provide for larger prints. Right now, though, I like the casual and painterly nature of the images resulting from my method. And as I look at the stream of photos I post daily, I realize I am creating a diary written in light.

The daily sequence of repetitive images becomes a linked conceptual project for me. Besides these sequences, I also favour unique, eccentric ideas which suggest their interpretations, narratives, and drolleries. I often try to recall the pictorial manner and conventions of master paintings from earlier eras in composing my shots. That latter preoccupation began the series of images in these books where a narrative interpretation might be implied while no strict storyline was written in these books. We have reinforced that by the selection and ordered sequence of the images printed. The Hollywood synopsis might be this:

"Two men, still boys at heart, become friends in mid-life and share their past and present experiences in Canada from the end of WW2 through the Cold War and the simpler times of the fifties. As kids, they lived as we all did then, under the background prospect of nuclear terror, through a Polio epidemic and its vaccination cure, through the hallucinatory societal changes of the sixties, through the New Age, the Fall of the Soviet Union and into a New Century and the political, economic complexity and ecological perils of the present day."

These days we witness the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, climate change and environmental degradation, and in this past year, the present threat and global implications of the Russian War on Ukraine. Once again, the subject of nuclear war is being spoken of.

Through a playful and sobering pictorial dialogue, these pages show the range of the still-boys' septuagenarian interests, preoccupations, joys, fears, fantasies and hopes, including our shared disapproving view of the way humanity continues to occupy, exploit, and commodify nature. Thus seen, the book might be imagined as a sort of midsummer night dream or, perhaps more appropriately, a winter's tale, with many possibilities as its conclusion, including the warning of a dire outcome that may result if we humans do not change our ways of coexisting and collaborating on this small planet. Though the ending might be read as bleak, its authors mean to stress that it isn't presented without hope. Indeed, we can change for the better because we must.

That's putting a load of many possibilities on these few images. But I will share an experience while selecting them that might help explain why they are assembled here. The second image Allan sent me was of the Soviet-era MIG 15 fighter crashed in the field I view from my rear window and photograph often. It recalled me to our respective cold war childhoods, which have informed our worldviews, and I remembered how kids like us imagined the possibility that Russians might appear overhead any day. Likely most kids at that age would recognize those jets and their insignias. The MIG fighter saw duty in the Korean war, so it was an era icon. Kids would play war games, often emulating our favourite characters from the comics and movies. One of our mutual favourites was the intrepid Blackhawks from the comic book of the same name, an international squadron of politically independent ace pilots who flew the coolest fighter planes of the era in exciting actions to save humanity. They outwitted and outflew the Nazis, the North Koreans, and those evil 'Russkies.' While it was all fun and played in our backyard games, the reality of the Cold War provided a sobering undercurrent. Many of us did have nightmares about it.

In Allan's case, the early years of the Cold War held unique and personal significance as his older brother was killed fighting with the Canadian contingent in Korea, a hotspot of real warfare in the early years of the Cold War¹. If one wondered as to the path that led Allan to become a Canadian War artist during the Somalia and Afghanistan campaigns or to his being awarded public art commissions, including the significant Veterans Memorial in front of the Ontario Legislature, the formative experience of the loss of his sibling would likely have played a part in his choices therein.

One day after receiving and pondering Allan's MIG image, I was out back. I heard a jet circling slowly and low overhead, probably heading to the nearby regional airport. I looked up and was stunned to see that exact MIG aircraft wearing the red star gliding low in an arc past the line of trees directly above me, sunlight glinting off the canopy and the pilot's helmet and goggles. It was astonishing! I likely did the requisite cliché gasp as it flew over the exact spot Allan had placed his crashed MIG in his photomontage. How incredible that this apparition should appear there and then. My first thought as I struggled with the meaning of it was a question to myself, a bit of magical thinking, silly really; was this manifestation somehow conjured by the image we had invoked? The answer was more prosaic, of course. It turns out that the Warplane Museum, a small operation housed at the Kitchener Regional Airport just west of our home, has restored this beautiful machine, and it goes out for occasional sightseeing flights carrying donors or paying tourists. I was fortunate to be in the right spot to see it that day. Before this discovery, Allan and I did not know of the existence of the MIG in this locale. I believe in the significance of coincidence and observe that we sometimes find or manifest what we can imagine or desire. There's a caution in that idea. And perhaps it's something that adds a dimension to any meaning this book might be imagined expressing.

End Notes:

- ¹ Private Elliott MacKay fell in the full bloom of youth, struck dead by shell shrapnel that penetrated his head. Most Canadian soldiers did not wear helmets when they went into action, in the first year of the war. He fell in the first attack made by a Canadian formation that was resisted by the enemy. One attack had been made prior to it, but the enemy withdrew without resistance.

Private MacKay was killed in a very small, two platoon skirmish near a little place called Sogu in the province of Gyeongnam. It was an insignificant action for historians and writers and reporters to take notice of today, or then, a very small matter. It was the first Canadian blood drawn by the enemy in a combat action, although there had been an officer wounded by an enemy soldier while the 2nd Patricia's Battalion was training at Miryang. And it was blood from a 17-year-old soldier from Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Private Elliott MacKay fell on February 23, 1951, two months to the day before his 18th birthday, which would have been on April 23. He was not a small man. He was approximately six feet tall, which stood him quite tall in those days. He was not slight of build.

He did not serve as Elliott MacKay then and his comrades did not know him by that name. He used a false name, so his records at the time of his death showed him as J.M. MacKay. He used the made-up name because he was two years too young to be in the Special Force or to serve overseas in the Canadian Army.

The name was corrected on his grave marker in later years but the Report of Interment that is buried in a bronze funereal bottle one foot beneath the soil, lists him as J.M. MacKay, the name stamped on his identification tags. The document is still within that bronze bottle, with that name imprinted on it. A copy of the record resides within the offices of the United Nations Memorial Cemetery.

Text from:

The Korean War Veteran

Internet Journal April 21, 2013

Alias J. M. MacKay, the story of Private Elliott Gordon MacKay

The artist AHM used various online resources including details from paintings, stock images, book illustrations, public domain photographs and cinema video grabs paying particular homage to filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. Other artists quoted include Rembrandt van Rijn, Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, Gustave Dore, Gustave Moureau and George Inness.



























































Credits

Alf Bogusky, Photography

Allan Harding MacKay, Collaborative Interventions

Susan Coolen, Design

Alf Bogusky is a retired public Art Gallery Director currently living in Guelph Ontario where he enjoys casual creative pursuits including photography.

Allan H. MacKay is a retired art museum professional presently maintaining an active artistic practice in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Susan Coolen is a photo-based contemporary visual artist currently in Kitchener, Ontario