



The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art 2000

June 24 - August 27, 2000

Robin Arseneault, Edward Bader, Allen Ball, Michael Cameron, David Cantine, Kenneth Doren, Karen Dugas, Amy Gogarty, Carl Granzow, Angela Inglis, Alex Janvier, Darci Mallon, Lisa Murray, Pierre Oberg, Katie Ohe, Maria Anna Parolin, Graham Peacock, Blake Senini, Candice Tarnowski, George Toscza, Nick Wade, Brian Webb, John Will, Mary Shannon Will, Angela Yee



*Alex Janvier,
Northern Athabaskan Art Series,
Slavey,
1995 - 1999*



The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art was initiated in 1996 as an ongoing exhibition that celebrates the richness and diversity of contemporary art in Alberta and fosters dialogue between artists and communities across the province. In 2000, The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art features 25 artists from 7 Alberta cities and towns: Banff, Calgary, Cold Lake, Delburne, Grande Prairie, Edmonton and Lethbridge. The 2000 Biennial includes an outdoor work installed on the roof of the Gallery and two live-performances premiered on the opening night of the exhibition.

The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art 2000 has been curated by Catherine Crowston and **Allan Harding MacKay** to highlight the important art work currently being produced in Alberta. The Alberta Biennial represents a diverse range of artists, generations, experiences and artistic practices

Over several months, after more than 60 studio visits, Crowston and McKay recognized a number of connections and common interests that seemed to emerge between artists across the province. The articulation of these subtle dialogues and the links between them became the primary focus of the exhibition.

Throughout the province, the influence of abstract practices, from the formal innovations of late-modernism to the more ironic, post-modern critique of modernity, is strongly felt. The works of established artists such as Graham Peacock and Katie Ohe, are shown in conjunction with a selection of younger artists, whose works play in this field of abstraction, including the mixed media and photographic work of Angela Inglis and Angela Yee. Simultaneously, the work of David Cantine and Mary Shannon Will, while framed within the vocabulary of abstract painting, display an almost repetitive examination of form and detail, that seems to shift the primary focus of the work from the visual to the conceptual. Nick Wade's 3-dimensional construction of an imaginary space depicted in a 15th century painting takes up this formal examination of surface and illusion. .

In all areas of the province, artists are concerned with the landscape and history of the north and preserving the natural world. From Carl Granzow's "floating canoes" - to Pierre Oberg's installation of stones and soil - to Michael Cameron's large-scale paintings of the mountain parks, artists call attention to the world that surrounds them. Alex Janvier's aggressive, abstract compositions speak of the destruction of the north and the fight for ancestral land, while George Tosczak through painting and Edward Bader through digital imaging recount stories of prairie life. John Will's installation, *Sixty Years of Hell*, tells a more terrible tale of 60 years of man-made disasters that have taken place within his life-time.

From the outside to the inside, the work of Darci Mallon, Maria Anna Parolin and Karen Dugas use the fragility of materials: paper, glass and light, to speak about the fragility of the mind and the body, while Amy Gogarty's complex installation questions the tenets of the "enlightenment" and the absence of reason that results from loss of memory, disease and dementia. Similarly, Kenneth Doren's installation, *Tonight Shall be My Cavalry*, uses light and sound to create an environment in which to reflect on the power of spirituality and the inevitability of death.



Calgary artist, Blake Senini's sculptural series, *Ether*, recalls a similar sense of the other world - one that is amorphous and beautiful, but perhaps alien. In contrast, the work of Robin Arseneault, Allen Ball, Lisa Murray and Candice Tarnowski, seems very familiar - cartoon-like creatures that remind us of the cute and cuddly toys of childhood, yet their banality is disrupted by an unsettling edge that speaks of a more general dread and larger social anxiety.



For the first time, The Alberta Biennial has expanded to include performance as a central part of the exhibition project. Brian Webb's *Sacred Time* is a solo work that has been derived from a larger piece choreographed by Webb that will premiere later this year. Using the flame as a metaphor for human existence, his work, like many of the other artists, attempts to address the vulnerability of life and the certainty of death. In addition, Kenneth Doren's new opera, *Your High Imperial*, an original adaptation of the *Songs of Solomon* and the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witch's Hammer), combines digital technology with live performers, and will premiere at *The Alberta Biennial*.

The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art 2000 reflects the diversity and multi-disciplinary nature of contemporary art and highlights the exceptional vitality of visual art activity in Alberta today.

Allan Harding MacKay

The Talented Mr. MacKay

A Tale of Two Cities

(and two curators and two galleries)

By Monica Westra

The pivotal exhibition of this year's Artwalk Festival is undoubtedly the Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art. The third survey of contemporary art in Alberta, it is generally considered to be the one of the most important indices of the visual arts climate. Since 1996, the Biennial has been a joint project of the Glenbow Museum and the Edmonton Art Gallery. Earlier this year, Glenbow's sudden decision to cancel the Calgary showing based on low attendance projections sent shock waves through the art community. The idea of a major cultural institution forfeiting a key exhibition to the bottom line seemed not only callous and shortsighted but, in many ways, an ominous sign of the times in profit-driven Alberta.

Despite the anxiety and pessimism engendered at that time, there is now a sense of excitement and optimism, owing in no small measure to the Biennial's miraculous resurrection. Two Calgary galleries, the Art Gallery of Calgary and the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, will host the massive show. The Biennial's two curators, Catherine Crowston of Edmonton and Allan Harding MacKay of Banff, have made this possible by dividing the work of 25 artists into two parts. While this arrangement may be disruptive for the viewer in terms of understanding the totality of the exhibition, MacKay feels that the distinctive architectural features of two very different spaces may actually enhance the viewing experience.

In fact, the success of the exhibition itself owes a great deal to the empathy between the two curators who made their choices together. Ideas were generated through the many conversations that took place between them and the dialogue they had with the artists. The process was stimulating, active, engaged and dynamic throughout the year that Crowston and MacKay worked together. They made 60 studio visits before narrowing down their choice to 25 artists. Crowston is first and foremost a curator while MacKay is... well, kind of hard to pin down.

MacKay will wear two hats when he is in Calgary this week. He will attend the opening of one show that he curated, and another that he created – his most recent work will be exhibited at the Paul Kuhn Gallery. This artist-curator duality is not unusual for MacKay – it is characteristic of a life in which several career tracks have converged and diverged over the course of his 30-year involvement with the arts in Canada.

He has accomplished a great deal as an art administrator or, as he puts it, "an instigator." In the '70s, he was the founding director of

the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge. In the '80s, he was a dynamic young director making big changes at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. In the '90s, he was director of the Power Plant in Toronto.

MacKay was also the project director of the Barnes exhibition, which was a blockbuster success for the Art Gallery of Ontario. This type of massive organizational undertaking – he was literally in charge of devising a strategic model for everything from promotion to ticket sales to display – requires not only a clear, logical mind, but also strength of character and uncompromising leadership. Yet, at the same time, this tough administrator was also an artist, whose work revealed a completely different facet of his character.

Allan MacKay the artist is poetic, reflective and sensitive. And it is MacKay the artist who stunned the art world when, in 1983, he quit his prestigious job as director of the Mendel to move to Switzerland and devote himself to his art and to his family. He returned to Canada five years later.

There is a dichotomy inherent in his art as well. While it is post-modern in terms of conception and theoretical complexity, it is traditional in its craftsmanship, exquisite beauty and poetry. MacKay's incredible drawing skills are the underpinning of his work. In the 1980s, he worked with landscapes and figures when these subjects were scorned by other contemporary artists. But his work was provocative because he always incorporated his stunning drawings and paintings within a conceptual framework.

He often worked in series and projects wherein he maintained control and, in effect, was his own curator. One critically acclaimed series was called *Source/Derivations*. In these site-specific installations, done over a number of years, MacKay responded, in various media, forms and on different scales, to one specific visual source that was his point of departure, creating within one space a totally integrated body of work united by a common theme. Three of the six *Source/Derivations* are based on Group of Seven paintings that are recontextualized and given new meaning through MacKay's ingenious manipulations of medium – drawings, paintings, photographs, mixed media, video – scale and subject. In another mammoth project, MacKay obsessively drew the countenances of hundreds of the most influential people in the 1980s Canadian art scene – a monumental 500-foot frieze of gigantic, over-lifesize faces of artists, curators, dealers, critics and teachers rendered in charcoal in bold and incisive drawings.

In 1993 MacKay was commissioned by the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program to document, through works of art, the humanitarian aid missions carried out by the Canadian Forces under United Nations direction. He was stationed with the Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia when the tragic events that led to the Somalia Inquiry occurred. Many of his works, primarily in photographic and video format, deal with this topic

while other works focus on the ironic juxtaposition of high-tech military machinery and the everyday life of the Somali people – an incongruous conjunction of time and space. He was struck by the intense heat, the isolation and the desolation of this east African country. The collective work is called Somalia Yellow and has been featured prominently in his art in the form of videos, drawings, collages and prints. It was also the basis of a theatrical collaboration with One Yellow Rabbit in 1997.

A job as the project director of the fledgling IMCA (Institute of Modern and Contemporary Art) had brought him to Calgary eight months earlier. But with no money in place to implement any plans, the need for a project director seemed premature. So MacKay left Calgary for Banff, where he still lives. He concentrated on his art for two years, then he was interrupted by his appointment as the co-curator of the Biennial. He found the curatorial work to be stimulating and satisfying. For MacKay, curating is a creative endeavour. His most recent collection, showing at the Paul Kuhn Gallery, is primarily made up of intimate close-ups of female faces and torsos set against a black ground, sharply illuminated by an intense yellow light. The effect, reminiscent of Baroque chiaroscuro, is beautiful and haunting. All the images are actually reflections in a mirror, and some works feature a model who scrutinizes her own reflected image. They raise issues about illusion and reality.

The history of art is reflected in MacKay's superb drawing and painting style as well as the figures, the poses, the compositions, the cropping, the lighting and the mysterious ambience. This effect is achieved by an original layering technique which begins with a colour slide transformed into a black-and-white laser copy that is, in turn, reinterpreted with charcoal and pastel in a very vigorous drawing style. The surface of the drawing is brushed and splattered with melted wax that is overlaid and highlighted with oil paint. The resulting texture is visceral and contrasts with the literalness of the image.

One spectacular and stunning work is an inversion of this technique – here, a Plexiglas sheet imprinted with a black-and-white photographic image of a young woman's face is positioned in front of the exact same image rendered in colour in charcoal and pastel, creating depth and distortion. It features a mesmerizing female face, glancing furtively back over her shoulder in a pose that looks like Vermeer but is disquieting in its sense of mounting tension.

Allan MacKay will be speaking about The Alberta Biennial: The Curatorial Process on Tuesday, September 19 from 12:10 to 12:50 p.m. at the Art Gallery of Calgary, and from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, ACAD.

The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art
Art Gallery of Calgary and Illingworth Kerr Gallery
September 15 - October 15