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Allan Harding MacKay
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"As to his own words, when MacKay talks," Charlotte Townsend-Gault observed in her catalogue essay for the 1988 AGNS exhibition, *Some Critical Countenances: An Extended Drawing*, "it's as though he erases half of what he says." Susan Gibson Garvey, reviewing this same show in the Summer 1989 issue of *Vanguard*, noted that, "While more fluid in his visual work, he nevertheless employs some techniques equivalent to erasure." In his artistic no less than in his critical encounters, Allan Harding MacKay seems intent on wiping out his tracks, leaving in his wake only the effaced, scraped, scratched, deleted, cancelled, defaced (to employ but a few synonyms for the verb "erase") traces of his already cryptic markings.

For his most recent solo outing, MacKay literally "rendered illegible," not to say "completely removed," by means of shredding, the single continuous frieze of pastel "effigies" on heavy brown wrapping paper that constituted his last appearance at a large public gallery. As if that were not enough, he went so far as to "erase" the catalogue itself by encasing selected pages from it in white wax. His familiar use of this Beuys-anointed medium allowed him both to half-obliterate the texts and images and to frame certain famous faces, somewhat in the manner by which the British artist Tom Phillips graphically isolates key words, phrases, and sentences in an obscure Victorian novel in his ongoing *Humument* project.

Some few of the disgruntled company who were put out of countenance by not being included in MacKay's register of artists, critics, directors, curators collectors, dealers, teachers, administrators, and artocrats might be heard privately to express their approval of the artist's decision to destroy the incriminating evidence of what posterity could well have mistaken for a cynical exercise in stroking on the part of a displaced "inside-outsider". Others of a more objective cast of mind may regret the vandalizing of some effective and sensitive drawings. The country is not, after all, so well endowed with first-rate portraiture of any kind, official or unofficial, that it can afford to lose even slide-generated likenesses that openly risk the charge of flattery or special pleading. (Canada is a country whose sense of relative values is reflected by the fact that it can boast a hall of fame for every sport from football to muskie-fishing, but not a National Portrait Gallery.)

MacKay's game, however, is and was a complicated one, as befits a post-conceptualist INSCAD alumnus who insists on staying one jump ahead of his viewers, no matter how desperately they strive to second-guess him. Of course, he anticipated our qualms about the *Countenances* from the beginning; our reactions negative, positive, and neutral were all fed into the mix by the wily trickster. The shredding and bagging of the original artwork itself, and the sacralization of the desecrated "relic" (each waxed page reposing on a lectern-like shelf), are as much a part of the process as the exhibition that occasioned the portraits-

intended for one showing only-and the accompanying catalogue, although it may not have been MacKay's original intention to deal so drastically with the physical outcome.

Susan Gibson Garvey predicted the following fate in her *Vanguard* review: "What will endure, long after the chalk and oil marks on brown paper have crumbled into decay, is the little booklet, in which visuals and texts are nearly perfectly balanced." Though this was "a collaboration indeed", Garvey went on to argue,

in the final analysis, the critic's text will determine how the experience of the art will be reconstructed from the reproduction. If, as it is claimed, one motivation for this visual embodiment of critical countenances is to reverse the critic's power over the image through the written word by capturing the critic's image itself, then, ironically, time itself will turn the tables on the artist, for it is a critic, in this case, who will have the last word.

MacKay has sought to obvert the first of these prophecies by literally "erasing" the work, rather than just allowing it to crumble and decay. As for the vaunted survival of the critical commentary that interprets and validates it, he has attempted-symbolically, at least to subvert this second destiny by his act of covering over the dismembered book with opaque and translucent wax. But of course he can't recall every copy of the catalogue that has found its way into the world. The collective and individual impressions made by the show on its audience, the reviews, the publication itself, all have taken on an independent life of their own. Perhaps MacKay's design, then, was not so much to defy the soothsayers as to correct a perceived wrong, which again I'll leave it to Garvey to articulate:

It must be noted that there is a whole class of "critical countenances" who are conspicuous by their absence: those practitioners and writers who may be classed as "alternative"--the marginalized, the guerillas, certain feminists, some gays, and all those who, by refusing to participate at all in the games of the art establishment, criticize the critics in quite a different manner from MacKay. Naturally, they do not appear in this parade of relatively centrist, relatively WASP identities.... Even some of those who did participate might feel a twinge of anxiety at what their inclusion truly countenances.

On the other hand, MacKay's undoing of his own creation can be interpreted as an act of atonement to those whom he managed to seduce into posing for his lens-a kind of ex-post-lacto letting off the hook of guilty parties. As a final gesture of reconciliation (apology? Snook-cocking?), MacKay here favours us with two "legitimate" portraits: those of the two men who helped to shred the 545-ft.-long, five ft.-high scroll on which the photographically captured *Countenances* were projected and traced.

The leap from these remnants and afterthoughts to the other works making up this exhibition seems a radical one, if only because the imagery and media (pastel, oil, wax, and DeMar varnish on paper surfaced plywood) of the latter are so conventional in comparison to the post-Dada underpinnings of the former. On closer examination, however, most of these eight large wall-pieces reveal their own dependence on, if not derivation from, the politics of erasure and addition. As with MacKay's 1988 Grünwald show, three basic motifs or genres confront us: still-lives, interiors, and fragmentary figures. Five of the eight works in this section appear, derive, or evolve from *Within the Footprint of the Existing*, a rather Zen-like title for a depiction of diseased-looking cut flowers (out of Manet rather

than Redon) that seem to explode like pinwheel firecrackers into the smudged and flyspecked air. (Only Louis de Niverville at his most sinister, by the way, has managed to convey anything so thick with implication as MacKay's blurred, granular atmospheres; but whereas de Niverville's element is charged with perverse purpose and leavened by macabre humour, MacKay's is frozen by moral anomie and shaded by an unnamed dread.)

Once again, the enigmatic character of the pictures tends to be intensified rather than clarified by the trademark MacKay inscriptions. No thread of (verbal) meaning runs through the sequence-like variations on unspecified themes; our hunger for connections, signification, denouement is not satisfied by the texts, which, the artist explains, are applied after the completion of each piece. Instead, we're teased by the reappearance of such enigmatic presences as the smoky, twilight rooms and the stencil-like black male cat (also out of Manet?) who stalks through the *Domestic Incident* series, marking his territory as he proceeds from the flower vase in *Retreating Sign of Strength* toward his rendezvous with his white, female counterpart in the punningly titled *Gentle Penetration to the Meaning of the Situation*.

The fact that these ominous and anonymous interiors were based on an actual hotel room in Calgary, and on glossy magazine ads purporting to represent the "ideal", does not rob them of their *fin de siècle* decadence or autobiographical melodrama. The very artificiality of the "sources enforces, if anything, MacKay's identification with the Swiss Expressionist, Ferdinand Hodler, whom he so poetically invokes in his own alpine landscapes and self-portraits. Does the theory of "Parallelism", devised by Hodler in the 1890s to convey the underlying unity and harmony of nature, also link the seemingly random or accidental figure/ground/text juxtapositions of the *Domestic Incidents*? Certainly, a line can be drawn between the *Critical Countenances* and the contents of MacKay's two 1986 shows: *Five Families: an ExhibiNon of Family Portraits* by Allan Harding MacKay mounted by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, and *Variations on Hodler*, held at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

The frieze of forms in *Requiem for Hodler*, wherein MacKay doubled the number of figures in an allegorical painting by his role model, extends homage and "artistic coat-tailing" into a kind of posthumous collaboration. Hodler's panoramas, however imbued with solitary rumination, are never empty" or companionless in the Group-of-Seven sense. In his own "landscapes of association" - the Rockies replacing the Alps MacKay retains this late-Romantic faith in the need for men to meet mountains. The disappearance from the scene of the human witness in his recent dark interiors effects a chilling arrest: not so much an erasure as a closure. By abandoning the room of the picture to the cats, the flowers, the furniture, and the lampshades, he makes explicit a lack no amount of gratuitous quotation can illuminate or redeem.

As if to acknowledge this void and reassert the primacy of the figurative, MacKay rounded out the present exhibition with three panels featuring gigantic female feet: the diametrical opposite of faces. The first two form a pair, both pointing downward, but with twin lava- or geyser-like flumes shooting up between the naked toes. What is being repressed, what is escaping despite the repression? The titular inscription- *Whose Truth We Cannot Test but*

Whose Pressures We Cannot Resist-isn't much help in puzzling out this conundrum (nor, I suspect, was it meant to be), The fountains become a waterfall cascading from the big and second toes of the single, upward-pointing foot in *Effective Visual Deterrent to Potential Criminal Perpetrators*. In both works, the strength of the draughtsmanship overrides one's objections to the deliberate opacity of the reference.

And here we have an irony perhaps not anticipated by this most calculating of artists~ proof, yet again, that what finally matters is the quality of the work itself, its physical realization in space, rather than all the philosophico-linguistic claptrap that postmodern critics insist is the "real" substance of art and artmaking. At his best, MacKay as a manipulator of pastel can justly be mentioned in the same breath as Degas. As a portraitist and self-portraitist, and likewise as an evoker of mountain glooms and glories, he deserves uninvited comparison with his mentor, Hodler. But today, the visual celebration of Wallace Stevens' "things as they are" is deemed by the arbiters to be not enough: there must be another "layer"; nothing should be as it seems; words are more important than things; theories outweigh such eternal verities as lines, colours, shapes, images; absence is more haunting, more "auratic" than presence, and so forth. Despite this hypercritical climate, the Jamesian adage about art making life (and, by implication, vice versa) remains valid. By hedging his bets with vatic subtitles and surtitles, MacKay undermines the power of his pictures to transcend their subjects and become objects in their own right.

Perhaps it's time for Allan Harding MacKay to concede that his dues to NSCAD have been paid in full, and that he no longer has to reconcile his conceptualist training with his pictorialist instincts. An exhibition by MacKay of pure landscapes, pure figures, pure portraits, pure still lifes, or even impure combinations of all four, is so appealing a prospect as to render even its unlikelihood, in this age of self-referential appropriation and incestuous deconstruction, all the more an incentive to discountenance the critics.

Robert Stacey