

The Banff Crag & Canyon
March 12, 1986
Banff, Alberta

He puts a good face on it . . .

Allan Harding MacKay, a Canadian artist who has been living and working in Switzerland for the past three years has filled the main gallery of the Whyte museum with a series of large oil pastels on paper inspired by the turn-of-the century Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler. Eight of these pieces are monumentally weird portraits in what one assumes is the Hodleresque style which feature the faces of both the old expressionist himself and his Canadian admirer.

The gallery is downstairs in the museum and on the wall at the foot of the first flight of stairs are two fiery, elongated faces which could cause some gallery-goers to step back up the stairs and out the museum door; the piece is that startling. The problem is not with the work but with the hanging. With its vivid colours and its eight-and-a-half foot by five foot dimensions, it overwhelms the limited space of the stairwell.

MacKay's pieces are large and should be viewed from a distance. The main gallery large enough to contain the remaining six "self portraits with Hodler" two landscapes and one peculiarly symmetrical figure study which comprise the show. In the six self portraits MacKay appears in the background in varying detail while his inspiration is depicted in the foreground at various ages. In the first a face of a man in his seventies, cropped at chin and brow looms like some multi-coloured icon while MacKay, looking irritated at some interruption of his contemplation of the back of the great man's head leans in from the left. In the next a more realistic Hodler stares fixedly out from the wall, dreaming perhaps of MacKay, who appears over his shoulder as an insubstantial image vaguely sketched in vivid blue.

In the third piece in this series Hodler and MacKay looks back over their shoulders from a windswept ridge. They seem to have surprised by an unseen third party in the midst of some profound dialogue on the meaning of art. What is interesting about this particular composition is the fact that the Hodler we see in the picture, a fortyish wild man in the prime of his life, was copied faithfully by MacKay from an 1891 self portrait of the artist. Though we understand that all the Hodlers we see in the show are based to some extent on originals I found in the Swiss artist's work this particular piece is particularly effective. It's kind of like MacKay's impression of Hodler's impression of Hodler and himself ... or something like that.

Ferdinand Hodler lived from 1853 to 1918 and according to the Encyclopedia Britannica painted in a style falling somewhere between expressionism, and symbolism. If he is remembered at all, it is for his large figurative pieces and massive portraits. He did, however, paint landscapes and two Swiss scenes are included in MacKay's show at the Whyte. *Der Thundersee Echo*, five feet by fifteen, is a somber rendering of a cone shaped mountain under a glowering sky reflected in a limpid lake. As if to draw our attention to the

geometric composition of the piece, Mackay has overlaid the surface with brightly coloured lines. The lines pop up in the other landscape of the show, the seven by five foot View after Hodler, a veritable turmoil of what looks like ocean spray with a mountain rising out of it.

This is not a subtle show, though the catalogue which accompanies it advances a rather ambiguous argument to the contrary. It jumps off the wall and engages the viewer instantly. It's worth a look.

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