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Paintings juxtaposed with headlines and quotations

Allan Harding MacKay
Susan Whitney Gallery
Until Feb. 16

By LuAnn LaSalle of The Leader-Post

Newspaper headlines and phrases from works by German novelist Thomas Mann are curiously conspicuous in the foreground of paintings by Allan Harding MacKay.

Mountains, vases of flowers, a sofa and the artist's wife are like background to headlines about Black Monday's stock market crash, the weapons market in western Europe and psychological statements by Mann, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929.

The esthetic and the troubling - the headlines and phrases - are juxtaposed in landscape, still life and portraiture in an exhibition that makes unusual reading. Vases of flowers in the style of French painter Edouard Manet bear headlines reading "The Bulls blame it on program trading," "Witness to a panicky scramble for liquidity," and "The Bears say it's time to take your money and run" gleaned from the Paris-based International Herald Tribune.

While curious about the stock market crash last Oct. 18, the former curator of the Mendel Gallery in Saskatoon said he doesn't like to be heavy-handed with words he chooses. But like it or not, the words carry a lot of weight, especially on untitled paintings. And, as soon as the headlines or phrases are read, all subtlety is lost and curiosity sets in.

"I can't tell you exactly why, other than it's kind of like thinking" MacKay said of his use of headlines and phrases. "I'm trying to deal with what I find disturbing about it in terms of my own approach" he said. "The image is like a background to the text."

MacKay, who has been pursuing his art near Bern, Switzerland for almost the last five years, has put headlines about the arms market in western Europe around the borders of a portrait of his wife.

"Work on French arms exports employs more than 100,000 people" is one such headline. But MacKay has painted his wife shielding her eyes as if she were trying to protect herself from the barrage of information.

MacKay also explores his fascination with mountains in the exhibition at the Lorne Street gallery. A Prince Edward Island native, MacKay's first experience with mountains was the Rockies when he was living in Lethbridge, Alta.

"I had a particular fascination with mountains, with their majesty and power," calling the atmospheric changes around them equivalent to mood changes. With this in mind, he sought to show that their perfection is not only fleeting, but abstract. A perfect triangular mountain rises from rugged mountains in one painting and a slightly imperfect one rises above a mountain in another painting. "What I was dealing with was the idealism within a perfect landscape," said MacKay, 44.

For these paintings, MacKay has chosen his own words: *The Emergence of a Perfect Mountain* and *There are no perfect Mountains*.

"Sovereignty of the Void," are in the foreground of a towering mountain. "It sounds profound somehow. But what does it really mean," he asked, also calling into question the meaning of the mountain.

And, MacKay continues the Mann theme in a painting of a sofa. Both on and underneath the puffy blue couch, MacKay has painted the phrase from Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, "Swollen out of all conscious."

Caption:

Allan Harding MacKay beside a painting of fellow artist Ernest Linder