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SOURCE/DERIVATIONS: ALLAN HARDING MacKAY
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Sorrow, Testimony, Anger, Interrogation

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Allan Harding MacKay seems more interested in the good and the true than the beautiful. Or, better, he takes the art process only far enough to serve the revelation of the good and the true. Many artists have self-consciously announced their re-engagement with the "real" world as a heralding of "committed" art, "engaged" art, art of the people. MacKay seems hardly to notice that he is making art. His attention is focused on the human reality he has to contend with. This focus of attention is nowhere more obvious than in his most recent visual "conversation" with the work of another artist.

Source/Derivations III is the third in a series of visual responses to other, major art works. Only this time there is a difference in approach, perhaps even a complete reversal of intention. In his earlier derivations, from Tom Thomson's Northern River (1989) and Lawren Harris's Isolation Peak (1991), his central concern was how these historic works could be looked at with contemporary eyes. He opened up layered meanings and symbols, explored possible avenues of approach, tabulated references and, in the case of Lawren Harris's Isolation Peak, he even built a viewing device for looking at the work. I had the impression when I saw these exhibitions that MacKay was trying to assist me in understanding the works or, at least, in looking at them. In *Source/Derivations III* have the feeling he is himself trying to understand and I, viewer that I may be, am not the recipient of his discoveries, but an observer of his searching.

Said another way, MacKay seems in *Source/Derivations III* to be much more focused on the Source than in the previous works in the series, where it was the Derivations that remained central to the exhibitions. In *Source/Derivations III* the six large photo-based paintings of Ron Benner are never left for a moment. It seems as if every choice of MacKay's, from materials to colour to process, has a direct contact with the original. He has not stepped back (as he did, I think, in the Lawren Harris exhibition) and mused over the work. His response is direct, sometimes almost a structural repetition of Benner's *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*, sometimes left open-ended, as if he could go no further in approaching the substance of the work.

And the image of Benner is also everywhere present. MacKay has photographed Benner, drawn a portrait from the photograph, blown up both photo and drawing, photocopied them, cut up the photo of the drawing to focus

in on the face that had experienced the tragedy from which the six progressively blackened panels came. The clear acetate photocopies of the portrait have been bent and superimposed over photocopies of the paintings which can be seen behind the transparent black acetate faces. Benner's friend is dead; the event is past; the blame is who knows where; the world goes on. And, yet, MacKay is not content to look at the work; he seems obsessed with the human act of this art. "I, too, am an artist; I, too, have loss that I hold in me; I, too, give physical shape to my sorrows," he seems to be saying. But, in the end, he can only stand aside and say: "Sorrow, Testimony, Anger, Interrogation." And two of these words, even, are not his, but ones he found in the text of an earlier catalogue essay, referring to *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*, by Matthew Teitelbaum: "testimony" and "interrogation." These words, hidden originally in the regular, visually concealing lines of printed text and now released from their typographic prison into the light of this gallery of sorrow, testimony, anger and interrogation.

SORROW

As I was casting my mind back over the icons of sorrow, the only art work to parallel Ron Benner's *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid* that I could think of was the funerary monument to Philippe Pot of Burgundy. In this late-medieval piece (fig. A, 1493; The Louvre, Paris), six black, hooded, full-size figures bear a black casket on their shoulders, their faces shrouded in the heavy folds of their monastic garments. Unlike Benner's work, this work has a certain mannerist (before Mannerism) decadence that contemplation of death often seems to entice out of humans in every culture and age. Benner's sorrow is black but shapeless. Each panel becoming increasingly black as he reproduces the old sorrow and cloaks it more heavily with new; black multiplying itself, sorrow erasing memory. MacKay, however, persists, perhaps wanting to know that sorrow as intimately as possible and needing some form for understanding it. He projects Benner's painting onto a similarly sized board and outlines the splashes of black, which Benner has thrown at the image of a train that has crashed through the guardrails, so they become deliberate, so they cannot be seen as random or of a moment. It is almost as if he draws the preliminary sketch for Benner's painting and exhibits it as one would the long preparations for the final work.

The sorrow, however, is not MacKay's; it has been given to him by Benner. Ultimately, art is a gift. Buying a work like Benner's is not possible; the payment is more like a contribution. MacKay understands the artist's generosity and accepts the gift in the only significant way he can. MacKay's gift to us is humble because it guides us back to Benner's painting and the arena of sorrow.

TESTIMONY

A testimony is the statement of a witness that an event happened. The importance of witnessing, it seems to me, has undergone some devaluation over the years. Even while the courts still dedicate days and months to hearing the testimony of witnesses for the prosecution and defence, the popular attention, at least in the endless detective novels and TV crime dramas, is focused on clues and the fallibility or mendacity of witnesses.

And yet, testimony and witnessing are the traditional basis of our most important social structures. The gospels in the Christian tradition are testimonials. With our penchant for factual clues rather than human witnessing, we have mined them for the "true" or "real" story of Jesus, but actually they are meant, even by their name, *evangelium*, as a witness of the "good news." The jury in the early centuries of the development of our legal system witnessed to the law of the community. Most of our self-improvement methods for dealing with emotional and psychological problems from alcoholism and drug abuse to trauma are based on some form of witnessing to ourselves about the truth of our own experience. As long as society is oral, witnessing plays a role that is central to all the community's life value and skills development. As the written word becomes dominant, the filtering process for true testimony is weakened and the witness becomes only an additional source of evidence.

The one area of our lives where witnessing is still dominant is friendship. As I look at the basis of my friendships, I see a surprising degree of dependence on the exchange of testimonies of experience, values and value-laden aspirations. In fact, the very nature of friendship is so closely based on trust, we accept what a friend says as true because no other alternative would allow the friendship to exist. In law, religion, mental health, where trust cannot be assumed, testimony is weakened.

It is as a testimony of friendship, MacKay is saying, that we have to approach *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*. I don't know whether or not Ron Benner and Allan MacKay are friends, but MacKay's work is not, I think, a testimony to friendship. It is desire to know a friendship which has gone through ultimate loss in death. Even as sorrow blackens out the dying, the witnessing of the friendship goes on. And that witnessing, that testimony, is true. We cannot question it or ask for further proof. It is this inviolability of Benner's testimony that MacKay wants accepted as the *sine qua non* of looking at the work. The act of making his art is for MacKay the act of accepting an undeniable truth in a world of changes, multiple points of view, and the relativity of all truths. But how can you get at that truth and why would you want to? I am not sure why MacKay wants to get at it or why he wants us to, but the how is clear. He uses the very tools of doubt - repetitive images, multiple points of view and relativity, at least in materials - to refocus us on Benner's work by taking us through the experience of our penchant for dismissing testimony. MacKay is not presenting his work as

a substitute for Benner's. In an odd way, he is distracting us from our other distractions in order to focus us on the truth of this testimony of friendship.

ANGER

There is a romantic nineteenth-century sculpture on a grave in the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris of a young man, standing helpless and weeping, while a huge slab of rock bears down inexorably on a beautiful young woman standing in her grave. At first it is the heightened and, to us at the end of the twentieth century, slightly absurd drama of sorrow that is striking. But after seeing and thinking about MacKay's *Source/Derivations III*, I can see that the point of the sculpture is not sorrow but anger. Anger at loss, yes, but more anger at the total lack of justice in both the death of the young woman and the bereavement of the young man. Although Benner's work is from a different world and a different time, the same anger at the injustice of death pervades his installation. It can be seen primarily in the paint repeatedly thrown at the image and in the repeating image of the death event. And, now, repeated again and again by MacKay, but this time by copies of the anger, re-enacting the original anger. MacKay seems to be piling these repeated images one on top of the other. I felt he could have kept repeating them with the same focused deliberateness and neither he nor I would be any closer to that anger. Because we can approach the sorrow by many vehicles: the black colour itself, the empathy of even small losses in our own lives, romantic sentimentality, we can share, even siphon off some of the sorrow for our own personal use. But the anger. The anger is Benner's. It is his right and it is not shared but only ~allowed to be seen. Here, MacKay circles Benner's work, sympathetic but excluded. It is the same exclusion of the Christian from Christ's sorrow and anger when he says on the cross, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" No one can know the depth of -that anger except they that have said it. MacKay, it seems to me, - respects Benner's right to that anger, but cannot leave it at that. Perhaps the central icon of the anger is MacKay's juxtaposition of -the dark yet transparent photocopy of Benner's portrait over the photocopy of *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid* and the blackening image of the event. Everything is transparent, but we cannot make out exactly what we are looking at.

Indeed, why are there so many images of Benner in *Source/Derivations III*? MacKay could have worked only from the painting. That is, after all, technically the source. Certainly, neither Tom Thomson nor Lawren Harris figured as prominently in the previous two source derivations. pieces. I think it has *something to do with this anger. The sorrow and the testimony can both be "derived" without the portrait of the artist. The anger is elusive and ultimately refers only to the artist as a grieving person. The profoundest insight of MacKay in this piece is setting the exhibition in yellow. For anger is not black (even if we speak of black anger) which absorbs and muffles, but strident and assertive,

closer, I think, to yellow, or, at least, to that yellow - MacKay forces us to stare at through the icons of sorrow. With anger, I feel my mind becomes too speculative and distant from the work of both Benner and MacKay. The repeated images of Benner return us to the portrait, which is, after all, the representation and presentation of the person. Behold the man!

INTERROGATION

There is a world of difference between questioning and interrogation and with the choice of the latter word from the catalogue text MacKay underlines the sequence of sorrow, testimony, anger, interrogation. This interrogation comes directly out of anger and only secondarily out of sorrow and testimony. This is an interrogation of injustice and, as such, is both specific and universal. No injustice can be limited, for if it were, it would be merely unfortunate. There is a world of difference between Fortuna and Justitia.

Among the rolled, waxed document pages in *Source/Derivations III*, is a logbook listing Ron Benner's fellow railroad workers. Among them are the names of those who died in the accident. There are also pages from the union agreement on maintenance schedules. It is thought that the accident was caused by slackness in carrying out maintenance. If the schedule had been adhered to.... If the work had been done.... Behind these "ifs" lies a failure of action and, perhaps, a fault. An oversight, laziness, a deliberate shortcut? The error was human, whether culpable or not. It could have been avoided. It was unnecessary. The loss of his friend was a human act. MacKay in presenting these documents is bringing something to Benner's work which is integral to it, but subsumed in a larger sorrow. MacKay will not have it lost, or else will have us be aware of it. Not that the documents can be read clearly; they are there, that is all. Who can pass judgment? What is the point now? Nevertheless, MacKay will not lose them. They justify some of the anger in Benner's work and the concern for that anger in MacKay's.

But the injustice is so much larger than the consequences of not adhering to maintenance schedules, whether deliberate or not. The further question is, what kind of universe do we live in where the most precious thing, a friendship, can be torn apart in a few moments? Is there no justice in this world? If this question could simply be answered "no," there would be no need for anger or perhaps even sorrow, at least, not on this scale. It is because in the deepest part of us the answer is not simply "no," that the interrogation of a specific misfortune becomes a railing against the justice of continuing to have to live in a universe we have learned to trust and depend on and have now been betrayed by. It is betrayal that is unjust.

MacKay seems to see no reason why interrogation should be limited. Or, perhaps, he cannot see limited interrogation leading *to As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*. His large drawing on the wall of the gallery seems to

me to be an attempt to make the Interrogation permanent for the viewer. Paintings, waxed books, Drawings on board, cases of documents can all be packed away, forgotten. The wall drawing, however, alludes to the long 'tradition of murals which have given "permanent" reference to important events. Permanence is relative, even in this museum-world dedicated to the preservation of cultural artifacts; MacKay's drawing will be painted over after the exhibition. But the allusion, for the moment, makes the point that any mural made by previous cultures has made: Here, it says, is an event we must somehow remember attempts to make Benner's work a permanent reference. And, for those interested in art history, it also reminds us that the great wall murals of previous cultures were not only meant to be permanent but always to be on display, not stored away in the museum vault.

Sorrow, testimony, anger, interrogation: Allan MacKay will have us focus ourselves to look at Ron Benner's art. It is not an explication of Benner's work, but an explication of the limitations of viewing and the limitlessness of our own experience.