



*Prints from the "Somalia series"*  
1998  
ink jet prints with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
various dimensions

*Portrait of a Somali woman*  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
74.3 x 111.13 cm

*Artist with soldier*  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
110.5 x 72.4 cm

*Artist at arms graveyard*  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
81.3 x 109.2 cm

*Blood bath of healing*  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
81.3 x 100.3 cm

*Two soldiers/Three women*  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
72.4 x 111.8 cm

*Three female nomads at oasis*  
(1:12:41)  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
69.2 x 86.4 cm

*Three female nomads at oasis*  
(1:12:42)  
1998  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
67.9 x 82.6 cm

*A walk in the Afghan sand*  
2002  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
121.92 x 161.29 cm

*Prints from the "Afghanistan series"*  
(Northern Alliance with Canadian  
soldiers)  
2002  
ink jet print with charcoal, chalk  
pastel, oil, damar varnish, and wax  
various dimensions

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# Somalia Yellow: Allan Harding MacKay

September 15 to December 15, 2002

documentation &gt; art :: life :: art

Studio 02.3

In Michelangelo Antonioni's classic movie about the documentary impulse, *Blow-Up* (1966), a photographer is drawn into a mystery while innocently taking candid shots of a couple in a park. When he learns later that the man he had photographed from a distance was found dead there, his images gain new significance. The summer idyll documented in the photographs is not what it appears to be; instead it is an expression of violence and aggression. Frustrated by his powerlessness as an outsider and the ambiguity of the story he has witnessed, he tries to better understand a single moment of time by obsessively returning to and perfecting one image.

The ideas that there are limits to what we can know, that there is an existential relationship between photographic image and reality, and that the roles of observer and player are in no way straightforward, produce a real-life sense of unresolved search for comprehension within *Somalia Yellow*, the work of artist Allan Harding MacKay. In 1993, MacKay traveled to East Africa as an official military artist with the Canadian contingent of the United Nations' humanitarian mission. Commissioned through the Department of National Defence's Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Programme to depict the activities of Canadian Forces participating in the mission, he was coincidentally stationed at the Canadian military compound in Belet Huen where Shidane Abukar Arone, a 16-year-old Somali youth, was tortured and beaten to death, and where Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee, of the now disbanded Canadian Airborne, later tried to hang himself.

The story of these incidents would become inseparable from MacKay's project to depict the military activities. Where previous military artists had gone equipped with a sketchbook or canvas, MacKay had recorded his experience of Belet Huen with both a video and a 35 mm still camera, amassing the visual documentation he would work with on his return to Canada. Fusing photographs, fragments of drawings, and video stills, MacKay created the series of collages from raw footage shot in the days following Arone's death, most of the details of which he learned upon his return to Canada. Struck by the open-ended nature of interpretation, MacKay began to explore his role there: "I began to wonder what I *had* experienced while I was there. I realized in retrospect that everyone in camp knew something that I didn't."

In *Somalia Yellow*, MacKay attempts to get beyond the surface to understand what took place. At face value, the work could be objective reportage in the tradition of photojournalism, juxtaposing the military presence with everyday life in Somalia and its backdrop of intense heat, dust, desolation, and violence. Simultaneously, the evidentiary or documentary qualities of the footage are undermined, for MacKay has worked conceptually with the photographic images, taking them out of temporal context, manipulating colour and texture, and changing the reading of the work through the use of collage. In the works, wax and tissue paper are used to physically veil the digitally printed images, recreating the sense that something is hidden or masked, and evoking the layered, complex nature of experience. The strength of collage resides in this, that it involves viewers as participants, drawing on their minds and emotions in the creative process.

MacKay has incorporated into his images of Somalia an exploration of perception. He is not challenging photography as a credible reproduction of reality, but rather the artworks make us think about how we know what we know, and the impossibility in this case of "blowing up" an image to the point where a truth is revealed. As Annette Kuhn has suggested, photographic evidence "can conceal, even as it purports to reveal, what it is evidence of. A photograph can certainly throw you off the scent. You will get nowhere, for instance, by taking a magnifying glass to get a closer look; you will see only patches of light and dark, an unreadable mesh of grains. The image yields nothing to that sort of scrutiny; it simply disappears." Leaving interpretation open, MacKay hints at the distant, ambiguous events that took place, drawing the viewer into a compelling search for understanding.

Curated by Shauna McCabe and organised by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery with the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts.



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