

SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 2007

WEEKEND

EDITION

\$1.65 PLUS GST = \$1.75
HIGHER OUTSIDE THE REGION

SERVING KITCHENER, CAMBRIDGE,

WATERLOO AND THE REGION

THE RECORD



Spectacle of war
— focusing on
the dilemma of art
based on the
arts of destruction
ARTS, C1

THE RECORD

ARTS

SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 2007

ARTS EDITOR: SUSAN CHILTON 519-894-2231, EXT. 2642 schilton@therecord.com

SECTION C



PHILHARMONIC CHOIR
SHOWCASES EASTER MASS
BY BACH - C2

Turning a spectacle on war

By ROBERT REID
RECORD STAFF

War and art seem like a contradiction in terms.

Nonetheless, war has provided some of the most intensely powerful images in the history of art. Just think of Goya or Picasso.

Canada has an honourable tradition of war artists going back to the First World War, including Group of Seven members Fred Varley and A.Y. Jackson, among others. Alex Colville and Carl Schaefer were two of the 32 war artists during the Second World War.

Allan Harding MacKay is both an artist and an arts administrator — he's currently the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery's curatorial consultant.

As an artist, he has been to war zones a couple of times under the auspices of the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Program, sponsored by the Department of National Defence.

He went to Somalia in 1990 and, more recently, visited Afghanistan in 2002.

Double Bind, an exhibition of recent, multimedia work on view through April 7 in the Robert Langen Art Gallery at Wilfrid Laurier University, is based on his trip to Afghanistan.

The exhibition's title is apt. Double Bind is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as "a situation in which a person must choose between equally unsatisfactory alternatives; a punishing and inescapable dilemma."

The term gets to the heart of the ambiguous, ambivalent and contradictory relationship experienced by creative artists when they encounter and make art from the death and destruction of war.

MacKay examines this conflicted relationship in Double Bind.

War artists are first and foremost observers; they bear witness. They document, ostensibly for posterity. Objectivity (accurate recording) and subjectivity (moral response) form a dynamic.

In most of the works comprising Double Bind, MacKay positions himself in the crossfire of this dilemma, both artistic and ethical.

He has replaced pencils and sketchbook with camera and videocam — the tools of photojournalistic war correspondents.

However, he more than reports.

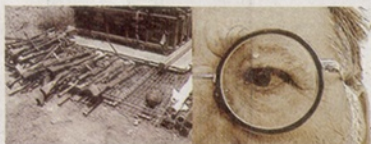
The video and all but one of the photo-based, mixed media works in the exhibition are derived from 3.5 hours of video footage taken by MacKay at Kandahar airfield compound.

Observation II consists of 40 video stills. Each is a double image, showing a close-up of MacKay's bespectacled left eye juxtaposed with various military images including guns, planes, jeeps, armed vehicles and tanks.

The images, which are mounted on polyester, are grainy, resembling documentary newscasts.

A companion piece, Observations, adheres to the same theme and format.

Allan Harding MacKay focuses on images of war and the dilemma for those who make art from destruction



ARMS FOR FEAR, ink jet video stills on acrylic, text on card, 11.5" x 30", 2007



SORRY SCHEME OF THINGS, ink jet video stills on acrylic, text on card, 11.5" x 30", 2007



BE EQUAL MADE, ink jet video stills on acrylic, text on card, 11.5" x 30", 2007



DESERTS OF VAST ETERNITY, ink jet video stills on acrylic, text on card, 11.5" x 30", 2007



LACK ALL CONVICTION, ink jet video stills on acrylic, text on card, 11.5" x 30", 2007

However, the double images are smaller and there are more of them — 600 to be exact.

The exhibition features a series of seven works from MacKay's Seduction Series.

Deserts of Vast Eternity is a kind of shadowbox, with video still images of MacKay's bespectacled eye juxtaposed with a haunting metaphorical image of a man in silhouette against the backdrop of immense desert.

Lines from a poem by American poet Archibald MacLeish (*And yonder all before us lie/Deserts of vast eternity*) have been placed on a board behind the clear acrylic.

Bulb and Doubt are companion works. The first is a tiny dried bulb, a found object as it were, that MacKay has mounted and framed.

The latter is an enlarged charcoal drawing of the bulb, with the following text:

Other
Than the soil of Afghanistan under
my feet

Its silken dust in my lungs
And a bulb
Plucked from a desert flower
Placed in my vest pocket
To shrink and dry
I doubt
I soars
in Afghanistan
At all

The odd work out is Wreath, which consists of images of maple leaves on clear acrylic, framed and mounted on the wall. Below that is a display case on a stand containing 52 waxed maple leaves salvaged from the grounds of the Veterans Memorial at the Ontario Legislature.

Last year MacKay unveiled his commissioned Veterans Memorial, made in collaboration with Phillips, Farevaag, Smallenberg Landscape Architects.

The exhibition is rounded out with a video from his Afghanistan Vignette Series, which continues to place the artist at the centre of the debate.

It's clear from the work produced from his visits to Somalia and Afghanistan that the experiences have exerted a profound effect on MacKay as both artist and man.

Still, he doesn't offer answers.

War and art are never black and white, despite what the pundits and propagandizers espouse. MacKay knows because he's been there.

Instead, he invites viewers to draw their own conclusions, to decide for themselves what his art means.

One thing is not in dispute.

With Canadian soldiers returning home in body bags, the questions MacKay raises in Double Bind are urgent, necessary and purposeful.

The small, elegant exhibition catalogue includes a short fictional piece by novelist Camilla Gibb inspired by MacKay's work.

Information is available from the gallery at 519-894-0710, Ext. 3801.
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Turning a spectacle on war

Allan Harding MacKay focuses on images of war and the dilemma for those who make art from destruction

By ROBERT REID / RECORD STAFF

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Turning a spectacle on war ... continued



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