"Occasions & Frameworks for Finding": Allan Harding MacKay From Charlottetown to Mogadishu

By Robert Stacey



The two groups of work by Allan Harding Mackay produced during an artist-in-residency at Charlottetown's Confederation Art Centre in the fall of 1992, and in Somalia as a war artist last spring, were shown at Extension Gallery, Toronto, from 30 October to 4 December 1993. MacKay is currently maintaining a studio in Toronto. His exhibition Source/ Derivations III opened at the Art Gallery of Windsor in January 1994, and a display of large drawings from the Somalia Series belonging to the Department of National Defence will be on view at Victoria University, University of Toronto in March 1994, in conjunction with the conference Pearson's Unfinished Agenda: A Tribute to Lester B Pearson

Today, artists lacking aggressive dealer-agents, secure positions within the cultural infrastructure, and/or a pipeline to the granting agencies are faced with a situation in many ways analogous to that which confronted the patronless vagabond portrait limners of the pre-Victorian age. It's as though all the labours, all the lobbying, all the late nights and endless meetings to which the culture-builders committed themselves from the 1870s to the 1970s were for nought. Did Lucius O'Brien, John Fraser, Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe, one has to ask, live and die in vain? For most freelance contemporary artists, the social safety net is a nebulous myth-mist, a contextual will-o-'the-wisp. As in virtual reality: "there" - but not there.

Allan Harding MacKay is an interesting case: a respected sometime public gallery administrator with a long-established artistic career who has produced a substantial body of work uniquely manifesting a mastery of traditional drawing and painting techniques overlaid or underpinned with conceptualist methods and concerns. Using tactics like the covering of old books, exhibition catalogues and photocopies of art reproductions in wax, or layering photographs with tracing paper, then scraping away and incising these coverings to unveil key words and phrases, Mackay is a neo-Dadaist *bricoleur*, a pictorial concrete poet of word and image who subverts the ordinary appearances of things including other art - by probing under the surface to reveal a palimpsest of alternative readings, a plurality of worlds beneath the monist mask.

In character, MacKay remains an inquiring outsider, resolutely experimental in attitude and practice. He is a latter-day nomad, native to a small, eccentric" culture (Prince Edward Island) to which he periodically returns, but is no stranger to the larger sphere. His willingness to travel, to meet new challenges more than halfway, to experiment with different approaches and stratagems, to wear - and juggle - several hats simultaneously: without this rare capacity, even the most resourceful of creative talents are likely to find opportunities for the making of new art elusive in the bankrupt mall-culture of the 1990's.



Allan Harding MacKay, Installation view of The Charlottetown Series, 1992, Extension Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum

From Charlottetown to Mogadishu showcases the artistic outcomes of two such chance-makings and chance-takings. The extremes both geographical and circumstantial of the locales where MacKay responded to unusual occasions and offers to extend himself could hardly be greater, and the work wherewith he responded to these settings and situations is equally diverse. So much so that a search for thematic unity/continuity is to miss the point. Yet there is a linking thread, sure enough.

In the fall of 1992 Allan Harding MacKay was artist-in-residence at Charlottetown's Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum. In the words of the gallery's director, Ted Fraser,

Our mission, through the arts, to celebrate and interpret the origins and history of Canada, includes the support of art practice in the new artist-in-residence programme. Generated by the residency, the works of senior artists may represent the historical and cultural landscape of the Island and will be displayed in community museums across Canada. The cultural landscape of the Island will inspire a creative studio practice, attract national attention, and assist in building an audience interested in the visual arts and the history of Canada.

That, at any rate, is the idea. But whether or not the invitees actually "generate" any work that "represents" anything but themselves and their own thoughts and feelings during their residencies is secondary; the artists come, they make, they meet members of the community, they take home some dearly needed cash, and a piece resulting from their stay enters the permanent collection of the CCAGM. (MacKay did have conversations with a few PEI. artists, but observes that his most interesting talks were with the Charlottetown fiction writer J.J. Steinfeld, author of the short-fiction collections *The Miraculous Hand and Other Stories and Forms of Captivity* - the latter of which, coincidentally, includes a mordant highschool reminiscence by an exhibiting artist now concurrently embarking on a retrospective exhibition and a large self-portrait.)

Allan Harding MacKay, The Charlottetown Series, 1992, chalk pastel on industrial brown paper, 6 x 4 feet

If he was tempted, from his chosen base of a rental cottage in Stanhope National Park, hard by the Northumberland Strait, or the basement studio he occupied in the gallery, to indulge in some roots-digging, MacKay largely resisted the lure. He did, however, make a number of works on paper based on one of local hero Robert Harris's numerous self-portraits and his paintbox - which, as displayed, becomes an "autobiographical still life." The genre of landscape did not entice, as it had for MacKay in the mid-1980s in the mountains of Switzerland and, subsequently, in the Alberta Rockies at Banff, as filtered through the guizzical Swiss Symbolist gaze of Ferdinand Hodler. Instead of re-submerging himself in the scenery and lore of Our Anne's green-gabled, half-tight, quaint little island, MacKay opted to fix his wryly penetrating eye on the universal geography of the human form. First off, a large portrait of his brother (now in the collection of the CCAGM). This act of filial devotion done, MacKay could concentrate on the set task at hand.

The Charlottetown component of the Extension Gallery exhibition consisted of seven (of a total of eight) large - very large - drawings of a single hand and a single foot, executed with chalk pastels on brown industrial paper. The origin of what MacKay calls *The Charlottetown Series* is a 1989 mixed-media work depicting a gargantuan foot, entitled *Effective Visual Deterrent to Criminal Perpetrators* (a non-descriptive phrase purloined from a newspaper clipping about police methodology). The 1992 variations came about as follows: during the course of having his portrait painted by Toronto's Lynn Donoghue, MacKay took a couple of snapshots of the artist's hand pointing at her unshod foot. These oddly powerful, even disturbing *aides-mémoires* accompanied him to Charlottetown, and served as the basis for the successive "permutations."

In completing the set, MacKay was calling on the classical, academic training as a draughtsman he received at the "old," pre-Garry Neill Kennedy Nova Scotia College of Art. To return to drawing in 1984, after a hiatus of a decade and a half, was to fly in the face of contemporary artmaking practice, which has sanctioned the McLuhanesquely "cool" photographic exploration of the body as a "text" on which social, sexual, cultural and political "codes" are "inscribed," but frowns on anything so downright Delacruxian and "hot" as the actual placing of lines on paper with a blunt instrument so antediluvian, so hopelessly dead white-male as a stick of greasy coloured stuff. Lines, furthermore, which with unabashed sensuality probe and poke and stroke a stretch of solid human flesh. The only clue that the giant foot and finger belong to a female - and therefore can be construed as "différent" - is the red paint on the toenails, a signifier which, however, is an artist's addition, made for the sake of upping the colour quotient, rather than as a gender-identifying device.

Unrolling the 2.4-by-1.2-metre drawings onto his studio floor, MacKay points out the disorienting quality latent in the images, which "flip" from objective to subjective, impersonal to personal when viewed upside-down. However grotesquely huge, these

gargantuan appendages are "ours" when we look down on them, so that the toes project outward, away from us. Whereas, seen right-side up, as when hanging on the gallery wall, the foot and hand clearly belong to a Brobdignagian "Other." A single image can be, by extension and implication, both a portrait and a self-portrait: you/me/yours/mine. S/he -eerie. (This effect can be achieved by bending over and gawping at the wall-mounted drawings through your parted legs.)

Further, as MacKay explained during the course of installing the show, another kind of "flipping" supplied the graphic variants on the two source photos: the drawings either objectively replicate one or the other, many times enlarged, or reversingly "flip" them, so that, in ensemble, the down-pointing digit seems to dance from one side of the foot and toe to the other, and similarly to perform a sort of soundless jig along the gallery walls as one moves from picture to picture, then steps back to take in the entire suite.

The detachment of the appendages from their "owner" (who incidentally or coincidentally happens to be a female painter) both invites and forbids speculation about their metaphoric function, if any. The psychoanalytically inclined will, of course, harken back to boring old Freud and insist that these utmost extensions of the limbs and the nervous system are sexually symbolic. On the other hand (or foot), one might counter with a quotation from Rosalind Krauss's 1993 tome, *The Optical Unconscious:*

Is [Georges] Bataille's story "The Big Toe" an account of fetishism? It turns, after all, on the eroticization of the foot. But since it insists that this is not a displaced erotics, a sexuality by proxy, it does not work along thelogic of the fetish. It explicitly dismisses the play of substitution. Of sublimations. Of foot = phallus. The foot, he says, seductive in and of itself, seduces us basely.

Bataille returns to this matter of the architecture of the human body, to the fact that, having raised himself onto only two of his feet, having assumed, that is, the vertical, man has no natural architecture (no "prow"). What there is instead is a structure of values imposed by the human subject: noble versus ignoble; notions about elevation, loftiness, ideals, as opposed to a space of viciouness and evil. The body is thereby inscribed within the logic of the paradigm, given formal meaning: noblel/ignoble.

But if the upright body has no natural architecture, it has, we could say, a natural hinge. The pivot on which its original elevation turned, the lever that still plays that functional

turned, the lever that still plays that functional role, is the big toe - no longer prehensile, for wrapping itself around branches, but now rigidified, for bracing against the earth. And that, precisely, is its problem. For the toe still belongs to nature. Indeed its ground is that of the earth, of matter, of mud. Dirty, deformed, debased, the foot fails to leave the lowness of its place, and so failing does not enter the paradigm. It is not that man does not try to. force it into the paradigm, to ennoble the foot, to give it form.... The foot refuses to be ennobled or even to be ignoble. It is, simply, base.' 1

Sometimes, surely, a toe is just a toe, a finger just a finger. Neither either, nor or. But is a drawing ever "just" a drawing?

A statement about seeing, ultimately, is a statement about believing (even if we are deceived). An act of faith in the there-ness of the actual. According to MacKay, The Charlottetown Series can be characterized as celebratory." Celebratory of what? Certainly not, Lucian Freudishly, of the gross actuality of human flesh, although in many respects MacKay is a satirist (as is the case with so many strong draughtsmen). And satire is, above all, despite its anti-social naughtiness, a moral mode. The forefinger points at the big toe, not to show it, and us, how ugly or base it is in comparison to the appendage that wired Adam to God, nor to remind it that, while the hand writes and paints and draws, the foot "merely" permits the body to stand and walk, dig in and toe the line. Instead, these drawings enact a linkage, an homage, even, connecting the hand and the foot and the eye and the brain in a single unbroken loop. The flesh and bone to which ills are heir, that the earth literally inherits when they fail and fall, are kin with mind, one and the other/same. Blown up by slide-projector to superhuman size, transferred by charcoal and pastel from lens-thrown, translucent, three-dimensional image to opaque, two-dimensional drawing, these instruments of creation and locomotion are truly heroic as well as truly monstrous, attached by implication to paradigms who /which exist in the time-space of the imagination beyond the gallery walls.

On third thought, the entire *The Charlottetown Series* and the works that led up to it (and will lead out of it) seem to be less of a celebration than a meditation. Which, in a religious sense, is a sober and reflective form of celebrating. By contrast, MacKay's Somalian work "embodies" - a key word - "a more sombre and questioning tone," as the artist himself explains.

If the Charlottetown drawings sprang of an opportunity to continue with a contemplative investigation of formal and intellectual concerns carried out in familiar and harmonious surroundings with strong, long-term personal associations for the artist, the artworks engendered by MacKay in famine-fraught, drought-ridden, war-torn northwestern Somalia, near the Ethiopian border, came about because of an initiative pursued by an artist in quest not so much of new material as of occasions and frame works for its finding. That the initiative was launched by a military authority as an imageenhancement, damage-control, posterity-influencing exercise is nicely ironic. But then, this same strained relationship between individual witness and institutional agendas confronted and sometimes confounded the Canadian painters and photographers commissioned to record the land, sea and air campaigns of World War One through Lord Beaverbrook's War Memorials scheme. Negotiating a rapprochement between personal artistic integrity and the claims, demands and expectations of the contractor, while doing justice to that non-aligned third party, the truth, is merely the most philosophical of the many tasks assigned to the seeker and accepter of the documentary role.



Installation: The Somalia Series, 1993, 1 1/2 hour video, collage wall of print media, wax and tracing paper, framed mixed media collage works on shelves.

As it happens, a direct line can be traced between Charlottetown and Mogadishu - "Dish" in U.S. military parlance - in Allan Harding MacKay's experience: as he explained to the *Globe and Mail's* Kate Taylor in April 1993, the sight of a cenotaph in the square next to the Confederation Centre, and an encounter with Laura Brandon, curator of the Canadian War Museum, set him to wondering artists' program. "Coincidentally," Taylor writes, "when he phoned the defence department to inquire, he found it was currently seeking an artist to go to Somalia under the contemporary equivalent, a twenty-five year-old program that employs artists at home and abroad to record the activities of the Canadian Forces." ²

who had depicted this country's involvement in the Gulf War for the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program. According to this arrangement, he discovered, the Department of National Defence sends the successful candidate to the hotspot of the month, receiving, in return for payment of the artist's expenses, four works for its permanent collection. CAFCAP is administered by Major Walter Chipchase, with the able assistance of Jane Douglas.

Having been outfitted in khaki Army fatigues and temporarily elevated to the rank of captain, MacKay was dispatched on 15 March 1993, via Trenton, Lahr and Nairobi, to Belet Huen, the area of northwestern Somalia allotted to Canada under the United Nations-coordinated international peacekeeping - or rather, as he stresses, peacemaking - plan. He travelled as part of a group of Canadian reporters and photographers, accompanied by a Forces public relations officer, assigned to document the activities of the Canadian contingent as part of the U.N. forces' attempts, amid the horror and confusion of the Somalian civil war, to distribute the essentials of life to those affected. Operating from this base over a nine-day period, he made up for lack of time and limited contact with the local populace by taking hundreds of 35mm slides and shooting nearly two hours of videotape. A colour monitor at the Extension Gallery ran a rough-cut version of this latter record, opening with a tent shot at Belet Huen, continuing with a lengthy personnel-carrier journey through the shell-shot urban war zone, and concluding with the flight out of Mogadishu, which briefly touched down in Mombassa, Kenya.

These raw materials were the sources of three separate but related series of works, two of which are represented in this exhibition. The first of these constitutes the "official" aspect of the commission, and can be seen as a response to the propaganda-and posterity- related expectations of the commissioning body: a group of large, framed, black charcoal-on brown-paper drawings, highlit with chalk pastel. Of these, the Department of National Defence selected four and purchased an additional two, for a total of six. The Canadian War Museum bought a further two, both portraits, as part of a purchase-donation arrangement worked out with the artist.

Left: Installation: The Somalia Series, (detail), 1993. Right: Installation: The Charlottetown Series. 1992,





MacKay informed a *Legion* magazine reporter in September 1993 that "The drawings are basically monochromatic ... " He insists, however, that the statement put into his mouth by the writer of the profile -that they "reflect ominous undertones" - does not represent his own feelings. If this sombre or sinister note exists, determination of its source depends on the viewer and the point of view: for some, it comes from the Somalian presences in the images, whom MacKay was "very conscious of trying to bring" into the picture "with the Canadian peacemakers"; for others, the menace emanates from the soldiery and its war machinery. Uncomfortable about such readings, MacKay makes no direct comment on this potential tension in his titles: as in Commander Labbé with Donkey and Hercules, these descriptive inscriptions report, simply and objectively, what is in the picture. MacKay remarked to Kate Taylor, however, that he was "struck by the contrast" between the Canadians' armoured vehicles and the Somalis' donkeys and camels, which became a focus of this first aspect of the work. "My interest", he says, "was in attempting to get a number of portraits - not only of the troops but of the Somalians. I was interested in the very simple juxtaposition between the western military presence and the Somalian reality."

Of a more private and speculative nature are the two sequences that made up the second half of From Charlottetown to Mogadishu, which stem from an incident of which MacKay was an inadvertent, indirect witness. During his stay at Belet Huen, he and the journalists present were alerted to the fact that something untoward had happened by the unexplained arrival of an ambulance at the underground detention cell at the Canadian compound. As subsequent reports were to explain, the ambulance had been called in response to the attempted suicide of a Canadian soldier who had been accused of torturing and then murdering a Somali male, whom he had apprehended in the process of breaking into the compound. MacKay believes that, had the journalists in his group not seen the vehicle, they would not have asked the questions that led to the disclosure of the scandal in Canada, which ultimately added to the negative factors that contributed to the defeat of the ex-defence minister who had overseen the alleged cover-up, Kim Campbell. "It's added a whole dark, subterranean text to the trip", MacKay told Kate Taylor, "because really the experience was so very up - a sense of something had been achieved in humanitarian terms."

That there was more to this incident than the artist had been aware of became clear on MacKay's return to Toronto, when he read newspaper stories about the incidents that had led up to the attempted suicide. He immediately began to assemble a clipping file, daily snipping reports from the *Toronto Star* and *the Globe and Mail*, pasting them on sheets of tracing paper and coating them with melted wax, which he applied with a paintbrush. This archive, neatly pinned to one of the walls of the alcove off the main Extension Gallery in which *The Charlottetown Series* drawings hung, formed the "background" to the framed compositions

Opposite this textual testament was a less orderly welter of "uninterpreted" visual data, similarly collected and treated: an array of unframed, photocopied, yellow oil-washed blowups from source slides by, and of, MacKay on the scene. Dominating the photoarchive (much of it so dark, or so distorted by the multi-generational photocopying process, as to be barely "legible") was a panoramic, multi-segment view of a heavy-metal cemetery, the western (and eastern) psyche's quilty-conscience elephants' gravevard: a pitiful pitful of corroded tanks and defanged artillery, identifiable through their design and insignia as to their countries of origin. As MacKay observes, an archaeologist of the future could excavate this still beautiful site, stratum after stratum, to expose the history of armed intervention in Somalia. The people in these murky images are obscure enough as to be ghostly, but they are there, lurking amid the metallic carcasses, watching us watch, implicating us in the process of revelation. We have seen the enemy, and it is you-knowwho.

These incongruously placid records of terrorism and colonialism bogged down in rust and dust are hung cheek-by-jowl with a treatment of perhaps this war's most viscerally shocking and unforgettable media image: the much-reproduced photograph by the Toronto Star's Paul Watson of the downed American helicopter pilot whose mutilated body was dragged by a raging mob through the streets of Mogadishu. At the base of this collage MacKay has gouged into the wax coating the epitaph-like date, "1993"; beside it he has placed a reproduction of an ink drawing by Goya depicting a similar subject, entitled No se puede mirar ("This does not bear looking at"), which he has inscribed "I814". Other such depictions of the bodies of dead soldiers being subjected to unspeakable indignities are jolted from the subconscious by this illustration of the endless cycle of violence that is history: for instance, Achilles dragging the corpse of Hector around the walls of Troy, as interpreted by the late-Renaissance painter-engraver Pietro Testa.... to conflate Girodoux's and Semprun's titles, La Guerre de Troie n'est pas finie. And may never be. Ranged on shelves across this double array of "evidence" and on the main wall of the alcove was a set of mail, framed collages, each of which had its origin in a variously photo-generated colour or black-and-white copy of a blown-up photo-print, either by MacKay or by one of the journalists on the tour. These works on paper were variously treated, according to his by-now familiar vocabulary of image- and text-altering devices and techniques: veils of tracing paper and coatings of white wax, here and there strategically removed to reveal portions of pictures and words. Close examination shows that, counterpoising (and perhaps undermining) this essentially positive and straightforward coverage of the Canadian peacemakers' efforts to bring order and stability to this African land of calamity and want is the "other" Somalian story: the alleged military and political coverup. Between the lines of the Holding Cell sub-set we read what exploded upon our consciousness within weeks of MacKay's return to Toronto: the still unfolding saga of the alleged murders by Canadian soldiers of two Somali men, and the attempted suicide of one of the soldiers, for reasons and in circumstances still not fully known and perhaps never completely to be disclosed.

arranged on wooden shelves on all three walls of the alcove, each of which was painted yellow to suggest both the relentless equatorial sun and the omnipresent desert. The colouring also conveyed an ethereal quality, akin to the undefined aura that 'charges MacKay's portraits and figure studies with something of the otherworldliness of gold-leaf-haloed medieval saints and angels.

As the Legion writer tersely states, these "more questioning, dense works ... will not become part of the National Defence holdings." 3 Canadian War Museum, on the other hand, surprisingly purchased, in addition to the two portraits, three of the Holding Cell Series: Probe, Doctor and Error. The first of this trio combines a treated photograph of a Somali woman, who shields her face from the camera, with a newspaper clipping about the incidents in the infamous detention cell, under a headline beginning with the word "Probe". The second draws its title from the press coverage of the military doctor who first blew the whistle on the alleged misconduct by Canadian troops, which the media contended had been hushed up to spare Kim Campbell from embarrassment during her Tory leadership drive, a federal election campaign ago. With the public, globally exposed humiliation of the corpse of the American airman in the back of our minds, we ponder the secret, subterranean incidence of torture and killing that allegedly took place under ground and under cover, in the bunker-like holding cell. During a peacekeeping mission. During a Mission. A late twentieth-century crusade.

Balancing these aghast gazings into the abyss of inhuman cruelty and human suffering, on the yellow wall wax-papered with newspaper clippings, was a compelling image that was bound to be controversial because of the virtual certainty that it would be misconstrued, thanks to the grisly and perturbing documents that surround it. Mother and Child Triptych - the religious connotations of the title are intentionally invoked - presents three transformations by the artist of a photograph by Paul Ferguson (a Canadian freelancer) of a mother standing over a thin, naked boy, who is covered from head to foot in blood. Without explanation, this is sure to be taken as evidence of grievous bodily harm having just been inflicted on a defenceless Third World innocent. But in fact, as MacKay's own (admittedly invasive) video record of the strange daybreak scene reveals, what we have here is some kind of baptism, purification ritual or, most likely, folk remedy, administered, perhaps, in connection with Ramadan. The vital information that is not contained in the still image, but which becomes clear from the contextualizing video footage running on the TV monitor on the floor at the base of the wall, is that an abbatoir scene unfolds in which the slaughtering of a calf is shown; as the struggling victim's throat is being slit, a woman steps forward with a basin and collects a bowlful of blood, then pours it over her child's head and rubs it into his skin. Sooner or later, somehow, some place, the gesture quietly says, the healing must begin.

Because the clan wars are far from over - this internecine conflict may resist, by its very nature, any western-imposed solution - MacKay has continued to feed the image-bank he brought back with him to Canada. The amassed outcome of this daily act of witnessing (which has documented such more recent events as the failed, foiled hunt for the warlord General Aideed, the ongoing investigation of the murders, and the recent charge of "negligent performance of duty" that has been brought against the reassigned Canadian commander) overflowed the waxed-clipping-wall and built up in an orderly leafpile on top of the TV monitor. MacKay added to this stack throughout the duration of the exhibition, then sealed the resulting "book" in wax, periodically laying down more leaves as new stories hit the papers. This perhaps never-to-be finished work he has entitled *Accumulation Print-Media Tome/Tomb*.

"It might take some time for me to digest the experience", MacKay was quoted by Kate Taylor as saying of his Somalian sojourn. "The way I try to move things out is through the drawings." The *Somalia Series* portion of this exhibition thus was an instalment in a process of observation and testimony that has both a diaristic and a reportorial aspect, and can be as continuous and inclusive or timely and selective as the artist chooses. The results, as displayed on the walls and on the monitor during the installation, constitute a collective work-in-progress, in appearance as deliberately unfinished and provisional as the events on the front page and the CNN-tuned TV screen are framed, edited and sound-bitten for family viewing in the safety of the North American living room.

With their varying degrees of opacity and translucency, the layers of wax and skinlike skeins of tracing paper impart a sense of mystery and mystification; MacKay, after all, was not allowed into any combat zones and witnessed no fighting. (The War Memorials artists were permitted to record only the enemy dead.) The Somalia/ Ottawa enigma thus finds its mediumistic metaphor in Allan Harding MacKay's laminations and waferings and deliberate obfuscations, which, however, can be cut, scraped and peeled away and highlit to reveal some hint of what might really have gone on, is going on, will, Waiting for *Godot*-like, go on.

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, an October book, 1993), p.184.

² Kate Taylor, "Portraits of the peacemakers", *The Globe and Mail*, 27 April 1993.

³ Canada's War Art: Allan MacKay", *Legion* 68 (September 1993): 13.

⁴ Allan MacKay, quoted by Kate Taylor in "Portraits of the peacemakers"