



LEFT: Canadian soldiers unload a Hercules aircraft in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

ABOVE: Women hanging clothes at the Mogadishu airport.

THE ART OF WAR

ALLAN MACKAY IS A CANADIAN ARTIST AND CURATOR originally from Charlottetown, P.E.I. He has been the director of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, Saskatoon's Mendel Art Gallery, and the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery of Toronto.

In 1996, Mackay was given the chance to travel to Somalia to document the activities of Canadian troops in Bolet Huen, through the war artists program of the Canadian forces. Later, he spent two weeks in Kandahar documenting the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. From those experiences, Mackay has produced a diverse body of work, including paintings, works on paper, stills, video footage and a performance piece, produced in collaboration with Calgary's experimental theatre group One Yellow Rabbit. Julie Cryslar spoke to Mackay about his experiences on the front lines.

How did you see your role as a war artist?

I was curious about this tradition of the war artist. It's something that I had heard about, and I found that it was a civilian program. And right around the time I was inquiring, they were looking to send somebody to Somalia. That program was actually discontinued in the mid-1990s, but then reintroduced in 2002 for the mission to Afghanistan. In this case, they wanted to do a pilot project. Now artists can apply for the position.

The role is quite straightforward. It's a civilian contract that basically says that the artists are to document the activities of the troops. For Afghanistan, there were three artists who were sent, one who covered the sea, another the air force. I was the one who actually went into Afghanistan, on the ground. The Somali experience was actually quite a bit richer than the one in Afghanistan. I had a greater sense of the Somali people;

I was in the villages, in the deserts. In Afghanistan, I was only in the airport in Kandahar, so the people and the movements were all military.

The Somalia mission, there was a lot of controversy around it. Did you see any evidence of that?

I actually arrived 15 hours after the Somali teenager had been murdered. There were rumours going around that someone had been captured and tortured, but I didn't find out the details until I returned to Canada. It was a rather disturbing situation to think that was going on. And I did witness [Clayton] Matthee [one of the soldiers involved] being removed from his cell after he had attempted suicide.

It was actually because I was there, and other media was there, that the story came out. The performance/play I did with One Yellow Rabbit came out of that experience.

Can you tell me about that performance?

I did a whole series of vignettes from video footage. I actually only had about one-and-a-half hours that were useful. I expected moments, with dissonance between. I showed it to Denise Clarke, who has been with One Yellow Rabbit since its beginning. And at that time I really just wanted advice, or a referral, something like that. But the performance group decided that they wanted to make a performance piece of it. That's what became *Somalia Yellow*.

Blake Brooker wrote most of it, and Denise staged it. Three

members of the troop plus myself performed it. It was a mix of poetic fiction and factual documentary. They were there like a Greek chorus, asking me what it means to be an artist, and what it means to be a soldier.

Are there similarities between those two roles?

I think it's in the relationship to society. They want to have soldiers, but they do not want to see the results. They want artists around, but are really not all that interested in what they do. When the results of what the artist and soldier do become apparent, often there is disapproval.

These days, there's a lot of controversy around embedded journalists. Was there any attempt to control the kinds of images you produced?

To a certain extent, in that context, you can't operate as an independent person. There is always something of an agenda established when your actions are so circumscribed.

But, on the other hand, in Afghanistan, I took a video camera and shot three-and-a-half hours of my own footage. From that footage I made a series of stills. They never directed me to make specific images—we want you to make a picture of this.

The tradition was that artists were fully commissioned soldiers with a captain's rank. And I think that's because captains are able to commandeer a jeep. You were given enough rank to have some freedom of movement. If you were just given a private's rank, you wouldn't be able to move freely.

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Three female nomads in the Somali desert.

How do the pieces the military chose relate to the rest of the body of work you produced while in Somalia and Afghanistan?

All they have are the 22 pieces in the war museum. I have done numerous exhibitions, installations, works on paper related to those experiences. And they know nothing about it. For Somalia, it was the four pieces I did for them that are in the museum. Everything else after that was my own production. With the Afghanistan situation, the agreement was, you don't get paid for this, but they get you over to the theatre of operations, and you're then free to document the activities there.

I still have a video piece to do out of the Afghanistan experience. It will become a more subjective, a more introverted piece, about my experiences there, like a fish out of water.

Did it change the way you thought about the military?

Yes. Even though I had a brother who was a musician in the Navy band and a brother who was killed in Korea. Even though there was a military connection in my family, I always had the impression that people who joined the forces didn't have any ambition to go to university or college; that this was kind of a last resort.

But I was actually very impressed with the professionalism

of the people in the military. In Somalia, in spite of all the bad news there, the vast majority were very professional. They were humanitarian, building bridges, fixing hospitals, bringing things for schools, paper to write on, things to write with. The same in Afghanistan. The Canadians were there as active combat troops, of course. But in the aspect of dedication, professionalism, I was very impressed.

There was also the contrast of culture with American troops. The Canadians were much more interested in who the Afghan people were. They'd wind up playing soccer with them, while the U.S. troops were holed up in some bunker somewhere, waiting to shoot.

The experience, it opened me to the reality of being at the tip of the sword. It also gave me a closer look at the geopolitical issues involved and I have continued to follow events there since I got back. And in the case of Somalia, very little has changed since I was there, despite that huge investment. It is still a chaotic situation.

Twenty-two of Allan Mackay's paintings are in the collection of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. His work can also be seen at www.allanhardingmackay.ca

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Canadian soldiers unload a Hercules aircraft in
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Women hanging clothes at the Mogadishu airstrip.

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