

VARIATIONS ON HODLER
Recent paintings by Allan MacKay

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WHYTE MUSEUM OF THE CANADIAN ROCKIES 111 Bear Street, Banff, Alberta T0L 0C0

VARIATIONS ON HODLER: RECENT PAINTINGS BY ALLAN MacKAY



Allan MacKay, *Self portrait with Hodler #6*, oil and pastel on paper, 1985,

Allan Harding MacKay is an artist involved in the process of self-definition. After the rite-of-passage of art school in the 1960s, MacKay assumed the position of an arts administrator that absorbed much of his time in the 1970s and early 1980s. When he moved to Switzerland in 1983, he finally became able to devote his energies to making art and to reestablishing his identity as an artist.

During the past three years, MacKay has devoted his attention to landscape and figurative themes, the subjects of which are the places and people familiar to him. Using his family and friends he created a group of large-format portraits that relate to a particular art historical style and to his life in Switzerland. Paintings by the Swiss figurative artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) also provide MacKay with a vast source of material that he uses as a vehicle for self-definition and problem solving.

In 1985 he began painting "Variations on Hodler," a series of self-portraits in combination with reproduced self-portraits of Ferdinand Hodler. These large oil pastels on brown paper chronicle a variety of stances MacKay takes in relation to the master

painter: he accomplishes this both narratively and formally. Using as reference the numerous self-portraits (paintings, drawings and photographs) Hodler produced over his lifetime, and taking his own self image from slides, MacKay has described a series of "dialogues" that occur between himself, Hodler and, occasionally, the viewer.

In some, Hodler is shown as a fellow artist and an equal. Most often, however, he appears as the older, more established painter. While the image of MacKay studies the artist with apprehension or wonder, the bust of Hodler, large, florid and usually dominating the picture, gazes confidently and unswervingly out at the viewer. He seems completely oblivious to us or to the young, anxious artist inhabiting his space. Sometimes MacKay also looks out at the viewer, but quizzically, over his shoulder or pointing to Hodler as though he were wondering what we might make of the two of them.

"The metaphor of the artist fledgling 'getting into the picture' with the image of an (established) artist, is intended," says MacKay; "the unknown (MacKay) vying for the attention with the known (Hodler) within the same frame."

The images of Hodler retain the same style and texture of the artist's original self-portraits. MacKay reproduces as closely as possible, in oil stick, the original thickly-painted, brightly-coloured oil paintings by the Swiss artist. They are all large and, with one exception, frontal busts of a person who seems less curious than confident about his role as an artist. In contrast, MacKay's portraits of himself are sketchier, more drawings than paintings, and describe a person more curious than confident. His gestures are fast and animated, his features are drawn in muted blues, greys and blacks.

MacKay also uses the landscapes of the Swiss artist as playgrounds for his own imagination and creativity. He either reproduces the paintings of mountains directly from Hodler's originals or paints them in the approximate locations where the works had been executed. But as in his portraits, MacKay takes the

images and uses them to make his own statement. Over the lyrical, sublimely romantic landscapes, MacKay imposes structural elements by way of folding and drawing lines to accentuate spacial dimensions. The two bottom corners of each landscape are folded toward the middle portion of the work, leaving a series of triangular shapes.

MacKay's use of overt, structural elements originates in a series of oil on paper abstracts shown at the University of Lethbridge in 1977. This reinforcing of shapes and lines echoes what he recognizes as an intrinsic order or patterning in all things. The theory is very similar to the principle of "Parallelism" developed by Hodler in the 1890s. Parallelism was a philosophy of order and beauty based on the observation of the unity and harmony that underlies nature.

It was not only through the landscape that Hodler observed this phenomenon, but also in the human form; MacKay manipulated Hodler's figurative works and again made them his own. In *Requiem for Hodler*, MacKay has doubled the number of figures in an allegorical painting by Hodler and created a monumental frieze of forms.

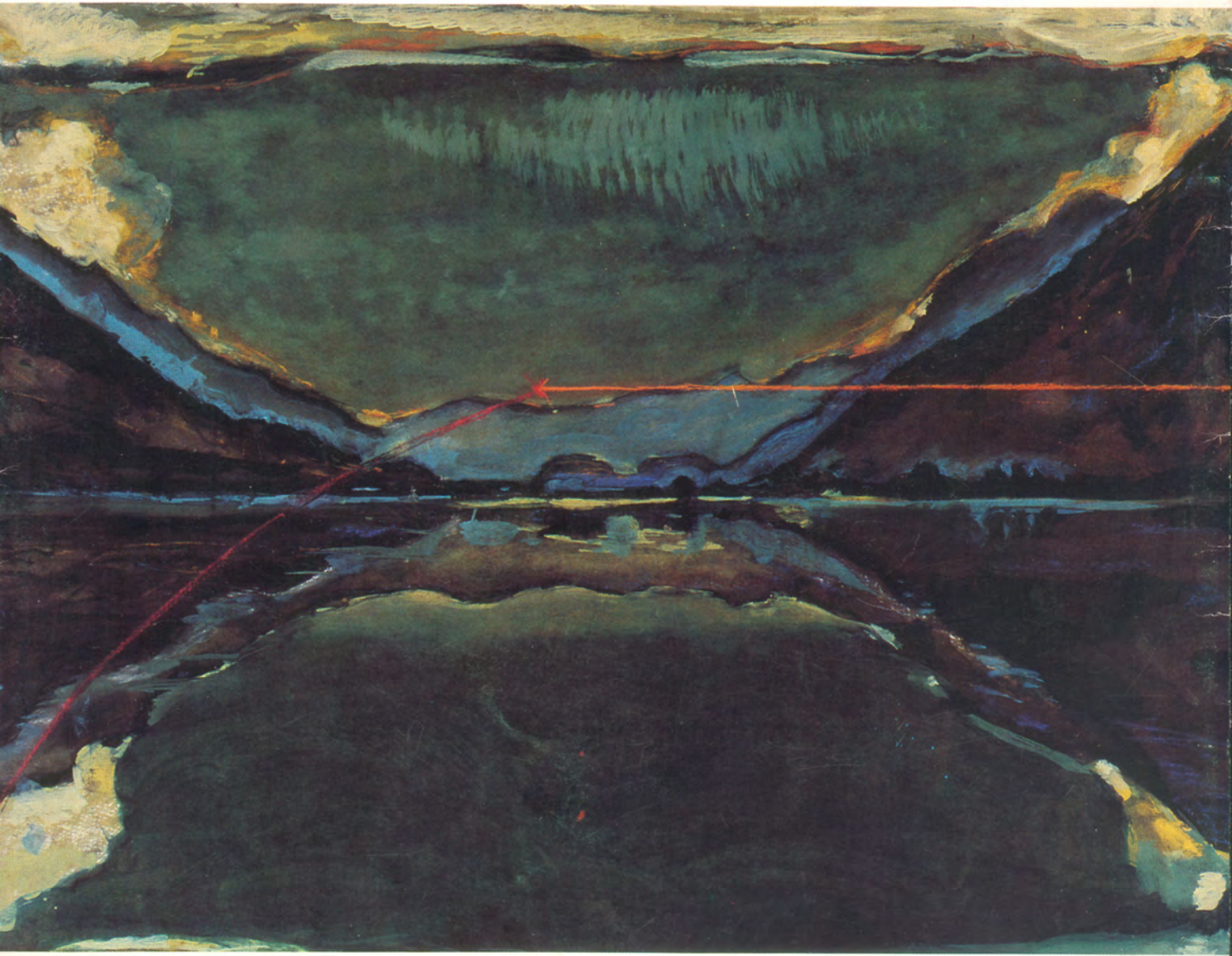
The rhythmic, repetitive pattern of lines, shapes and colours found in tree trunks, figures, or mountains is extended even further by MacKay into the realm of ideas. By the introduction of role-modelling or, as MacKay puts it, "artistic coattailing and the corollaries of imitation and practice," he maintains an intellectual parallelism. Like an ever-repeating object in a mirror, mirroring itself, the role of artist as master and student revolves into infinity.

Elizabeth Brown, Curator



Allan MacKay, *Self portrait with Hodler #2*, oil and pastel on paper, 1985.





Allan MacKay, *Der Thunersee Echo*, oil and pastel on paper, 1985, 5' x 15'

ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

BIOGRAPHY

Born

1944 Charlottetown, P.E.I.

Education

1967 Graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, majoring in Painting and Art Education.

Collections

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge; Saskatchewan Arts Board, Regina; Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown; Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa as well as public and private collections in Canada and Switzerland.

Selected group exhibitions

- 1969 *Young Artists as Young Artists*
Centennial Art Gallery, Nova Scotia
Museum of Fine Arts, Halifax.
- 1973 *Halifax/Vancouver Exchange*
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver
- 1977 *Reeder/MacKay: Works on paper*
University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge.
- 1978 *Drawing exhibition*
The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton
- 1984 *Evidence of the Avant Garde since 1957*
works from the collection of Art Metropole,
Toronto.
- 1984 *Bernischer Maler und Bildhauer*
Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland.
- 1985 *Woman Laughing in a Pigment Storm*
Audio Portrait, Kamloops Public Art Gallery,
Kamloops.

Selected Solo exhibitions

- 1962 *Book Works and Audio Tapes*
Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge
- 1984 *Aquarellen und oel auf Papier*
Galerie Engelhaus, Langnau, Switzerland
and Galerie Kreutz, Nidau, Switzerland.
- 1985 *Mountain My Yes and other densities*
multi media installation, Mercer Union,
Toronto.
- 1985 *Beispiel/Example*
Eye Level Gallery, Halifax
- 1986 *Five Families*
family portrait series, Confederation Centre
for the Arts, Charlottetown.

LIST OF WORKS

All are oil and pastel on paper and were completed in 1985.

- Der Thunersee Echo*, 5' x 15'
Requiem for Hodler, 5' x 12'
View after Hodler, 7' x 5'
Self portrait with Hodler #1, 59" x 81"
Self portrait with Hodler #2, 59" x 87"
Self portrait with Hodler #3, 59" x 86"
Self portrait with Hodler #4, 59" x 80"
Self portrait with Hodler #5, 59" x 84"
Self portrait with Hodler #6, 52" x 59"
Self portrait with Hodler stretched, 103" x 59"