

Allan Harding MacKay
Source Derivations VII



Allan Harding MacKay:

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Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Curator: Ray Cronin, Curator of Contemporary Art

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Foreword

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is pleased to welcome Allan Harding MacKay back to Nova Scotia and to include his work in the seventh of an ongoing series of exhibitions using the collections of Canadian public galleries to create new art. **Source/Derivations VII** is based on work Allan originally conceived during his term as Artist-in-Residence at AGNS and is a grand example of how our A-I-R program is integrated with exhibition programming.

It is always a pleasure to work with Allan. Our long association with him dates back to his early days when he was director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and his exhibition here in 1989 entitled **Some Critical Countenances**. MacKay is currently a contract curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, and has been a Canadian war artist (Somalia), director of the Power Plant and the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. Thank you, Allan, for your friendship and for sharing your creativity with us.

I would like to thank Ray Cronin, AGNS Curator of Contemporary Art, for his professionalism and for the coordination of the exhibition. Thank you to AGNS staff who worked with him on this production.

We are proud of our association with our corporate partners and our special gratitude is extended to Rogers AT&T Wireless for their financial contribution to this exhibition.

I invite you to enjoy Allan Harding MacKay: **Source/Derivations VII!**

Bernard Riordon

Director

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Bernie Riordon of the AGNS, and to Virginia Stephen for originally inviting me to the residency, to Ray Cronin and Terrence Heath for their essays, to Wendy Tokaryk and Troy Ouelette for production assistance, to the Banff Centre Self Directed Residency Program, Banff, Alberta, and to the Canada Council for the Arts for grant assistance.

AHM

Cover image:

Smith Distortion Series 2001

11 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Allan Harding MacKay
Source Derivations VII



Edith Smith (1867 - 1954)

The Red Cloak 1923

Alice M. Egan Hagen (1872 - 1972)

Portrait of a Girl from the Halifax Poor House
c.1890



Smith Distortion Series 2001, 11 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Allan Harding Mackay: Source Derivations VII

Terrance Heath

*engendered by an interaction
between artists, an influencing
that is always an interpretation*
Harold Bloom

*The work of other artists
is full of possibilities*
Allan Mackay

The Source Derivations series by Allan Harding Mackay is at heart such a challenge. In six of the seven exhibitions of the series, Mackay has been invited by a gallery to choose a work from a collection and develop an exhibition of his work based on the piece selected (the only exception being **Source Derivations I** in which the exhibition at the Ottawa School of Art was based on a painting from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada). Mackay has chosen a variety of works both in subject matter and in time, but each, I think, is a searching out of works which force him to see anew and stretch as an artist. He is responding to the works but is also using them as a measure of his own work.



No viewer looks at art more closely than artists do. And no artist creates without heavy dependence on other artists' work. The literature often refers to this interlinked chain of artmaking as "influences." The word, however, hides as much as it explicates. It is not simply that an artist sees something in another's work which moves him or her. It is that the best artists are always pushing the limits that have been established by artists before them. If you like, each artist sees in the work of his predecessors a challenge, an accomplishment that begs to be examined, reworked and pushed to a new level. But unlike the work of scientists which challenges and, if successful, rejects earlier work, the best artists challenges and yet honours the earlier work by the challenge.

His first two Source Derivations exhibitions dealt with major Canadian painters of the early part of the twentieth century, Tom Thomson and Lawren Harris. In 1989 the Ottawa School of Art invited him to exhibit a project based on Tom Thomson's 1915 painting, *Northern River*. Before I go on, it is important to mention that these Source Derivations exhibitions are by their nature site specific and shown once. They have to be seen at the gallery they are developed for. They are a challenge to write about because few if anyone beside the artist has seen all of them. Going to a Source Derivations exhibition is like a visit to Mackay's studio where you find him thinking his way through basic concerns of his art. In fact, I saw a part of the *Northern River* exhibition in 1989 on a visit to his tiny studio/living quarters on

Walnut Street in Toronto. The walls of the studio were hung with a long sheet of paper on which renditions of *Northern River* somersaulted around the room. Not only was he looking at it upside down and sideways, he was painting it again and again as if it were spinning around the room. The painting had become animated. Its shadows and bright colours careened through space repeating themselves in a half dozen different positions. I would speculate that he was struggling to understand the deft lightness of touch and the exact dabs of colour that make Thomson's paintings so vibrant. I think I see something of the experience of "wrestling" with Thomson in many of his later drawings and paintings, where dark shapes and shadows become designs around sharp lines and dabs of colour so that each part of the work drifts to the surface as your eye moves over it. His later work with video, *Somalia Yellow* and *An Icon for the Independent Spirit*, carry some of these

"discoveries" into his new media works. That is surely the aspiration of every artist who looks at other artists' work - to learn, challenge and then make it new.

The exhibition he did for the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto in 1992 focused on the 1930 painting by Lawren Harris, *Isolation Peak*. This was a large, complex exhibition with perhaps the occasional ironic smile when Harris's seriousness became a bit too daunting. *Isolation Peak* is a major icon of Canadian art and Lawren Harris continues to be central to the Canadian canon. Harris's often heavy-handed symbolism and spirituality are not much in fashion today, but his works hold their place because of their powerful compositions and brushwork. Mackay's exhibition based on this work is the most complex I have seen. He took on Harris's symbolism and spirituality, and he confronted Harris's position in the never-ending Canadian



Smith Variations 1999, 14 units, each: 43.2 x 27.9 cm

process of self-identification and the scholarship devoted to him and his work. Perhaps we see in Mackay's choice of this painting the clearest evidence of how personal the Source Derivations series are. The works are not chosen, I think, for any other reason than they engage and challenge Mackay as an artist and at a very basic level of his experience and ambition. Mackay lived in Switzerland from 1983-88 and one series of works from this period is entitled The Perfect Mountain Series. These were years of profound, personal experiences and mountains perhaps took on a symbolic function in his life as they did in Harris's. I would venture to say, that the symbolism meant vastly different things to these two Canadian artists separated by two generations. Mackay was in exile and going through a dramatic family situation; the mountains may have become a sort of witness to the possibility of stability and lasting presence. This is speculation, but in the Source Derivations works, Mackay draws and redraws Harris's Isolation Peak. Whereas the 1930 work celebrates strength beyond societal supports, a spirituality akin to Nietzsche's mountain morality, Mackay populates the room with mountain images. Some of them are sketches; others are heavily layered with encaustic so that the icon can barely be seen; and yet others are behind wax paper that is cut to reveal parts of the mountain image. It is almost as if Mackay set out to destroy the icon by multiplying it, or perhaps to make it more accessible, closer to us, less severe. The elitist icon of a severe and distant spirituality has been reconfigured into a populist spirituality of multiple renditions and easier access. In the exhibition room, Mackay then created a sort of library or archive of materials – catalogues, books, pages – set out in display cases such as one sees in large libraries for rare books and prints. These texts too are manipulated by blanking out sections, leaving a word or phrase here and there. There is an element of vandalism in what Mackay does to the texts and, yet, at the same time he is revealing and highlighting new meanings in the old texts. It is this ambiguity that I think is the heart of this Source Derivations, an ambiguity that has to do with certainty and chance, impersonal salvation and personal seeking of comfort, acceptance and rejection of shibboleths. Nothing exemplifies the

ambiguity better than the Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain (a clear reference in the title to the earlier series). The device is a round piece of wood applied with paper and wax on a stand with a triangle cut out so that Harris's painting can be "viewed." The device frames the mountain in order to be able to view the schematic of the mountain as symbol and the painting of the mountain as separate. Mackay in effect removes the confusion of painting as art and painting as message.

Source Derivations III of 1994 was entirely different from the first two. In it, Mackay chose a powerful, funereal work by Ron Benner, *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid* from the collection of the Art Gallery of Windsor. Workmates of Benner's had been killed in a train accident, an accident that was apparently the result of human error. Benner's six-part photomural depicts a train at the moment of crashing off the tracks. Each section is increasingly spattered with black creosote and rephotographed until by the sixth panel the image has been obliterated. The complex origins of the work and a description of Mackay's installation can be found in the extensive essay by Robert Stacey in the catalogue/book, *Source/Derivations: Allan Harding Mackay*. Mackay and I shared a studio while he was creating **Source Derivations III**. Day after day, week after week our small passageway "gallery" would be hung with black acetate images as he worked into the source. I think Mackay was primarily interested not in creating images or art but in seeing. Not seeing as with the *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain*, but seeing the reality of friendship, loss, death, error, transitoriness. For the above-mentioned catalogue, I wrote about my experience of watching Mackay create his derivations under the terms sorrow, testimony, anger, interrogation, the human engagement with death. I can't help but think that this exhibition turned the Source Derivations series abruptly away from art exhibitions to a more ruthless weighing of what it meant to him to be first a human and second a major artist. His next works were his powerful, breakthrough exhibitions on his experience in Somalia, a witnessing to the acts of war, everyday hope and retribution. Even his "palette" changed in these works. The strong, disturbing yellow of

much of the later pieces is perhaps an homage to the sand of Somalia. It is a colour that at one and the same time dramatically recreates the sense of ambiguity, which I think, imbues his work; yellow is at once a warm, cheerful colour and, especially played against blacks and covered with wax, threatening and unsettling.

Source Derivations IV was done in 1995 at the Edmonton Art Gallery and centred on *Balzac* by Rodin. It struck me at the time as an odd choice. What did Rodin mean to Mackay? Not having seen this exhibition, I can only speculate that it was something in the immediacy of Rodin's hands-on figures that paralleled his own desire to equate the process of his craft with the final making of images. It was also Mackay's first *Source Derivations* to utilize video and included images taken in the round of the Balzac sculpture as well as video images shot in Somalia of a Somali woman and a giant desert ant mound reminiscent of the Rodin piece. **Source Derivations V** from 1997, however, leaps directly out of his earlier engagement with the work of Roland Benner and brings to the fore the sharp-edged analytical drive, the respect for the source work and the new means of rendering his insights through the use of multi-layered acetate and mylar drawings. The piece he chose, this time from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, was an unnamed portrait, simply entitled *The Head*, by Edwin Holgate, done in 1938. To anyone familiar with Mackay's own portraiture work, the choice is astonishing. Holgate's piece is as close to Mackay's work, taking into account the sixty years separating the works, as it is possible to get. There are of course dramatic differences in size, technique and handling, but a number of Mackay's portraits, such as that of Liz Magor, could be set next to Holgate's and the sixty years would seem to fall away. I think this must have been a demanding and exciting exhibition for Mackay to do. Unlike any previous *Source Derivations*, this time round Mackay is working very "close to the bone." My take on the exhibition was that it was different in kind from earlier ones I had seen. There was a certain detached observation in Mackay's first *Source Derivations* exhibitions. In **Source Derivations V** he has lost his detachment. He multiplies through laser printed photography the images

of the head, the result being almost like radiographic examinations. In the end he reduces the head to a skull, allowing colour like a breath of life to come through translucent mylar. He brings images of his own portraiture works and exhibits them almost like comparisons. He scrawls on the wall: "A Corpse for the Soul's Return." The exhibition was more like an autopsy than a way of seeing. The word "cathartic" seems to have dropped from general meaning into a specific psychological guise, but I think it could be used as a description of the impact of this exhibition. Reviewers at the time struggled to come to terms with it. I think this wrestling with the work of other artists is a decisive act in the career of an artist. Usually it goes on behind the scenes. Rarely does the viewer get the chance Mackay offers to see the process in its unadorned and always incomplete struggle.

In 1998, for **Source Derivations VI**, Mackay chose from the Glenbow's collection three block prints by Walter J. Phillips. This exhibition, too, I was unable to see but a very perceptive essay by Kirstin Evenden and knowledge of earlier ones allows some sense of how this *Source Derivations* "fits" in the series. My impression is that this exhibition was primarily an experimental moving on for Mackay. His usual repetition of images and presentation of new ways of looking are there, but central to the exhibition seems to be a video he made of a pine tree at Bow Falls. He creates the movement that Phillips obviously desired in his abstract clouds. The video includes music composed by Richard MacDowell of the One Yellow Rabbit Performance Theatre. Mackay's work is almost always based on photographic image making and then worked over by hand. He goes to some lengths to make his source obvious in the finished works. The editing process allows him to work with the photographic image through the technology itself.

With **Source Derivations VII**, of which I have seen initial sketches and images, Mackay has returned to the portrait. As in the case of the other galleries, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia offered him the opportunity to choose works from their collection and develop a *Source Derivations* exhibition. The exhibition is based on a 1923 painting by Edith Smith of an aboriginal woman and entitled *The*

Red Cloak and a 19 work by Alice Hagan, entitled *Poor Girl Portrait*. He refers to his pieces in the exhibition as “distortions.” These are first photographic distortions, that is, photos taken from different angles of the original paintings hung on their racks in the gallery’s permanent storage vaults, so that the image is seen flattened and out of perspective. It is not exactly a distortion, but rather a sort of non-confrontational approach to the portraits. Again, as in his choice of the Holgate portrait, there is a resemblance in the Smith work to his own portraits. I would see this Source Derivations as directly related to the Holgate one at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. The initial sketches, however, suggest that he has moved on from the earlier Source Derivations and is exploring the changing perspectives of his recent mirror-image works, albeit without the mirror. In this series he combines and layers the new technologies of image scanning and jet ink printing with the visceral application of charcoal, pastel and wax

through hand rendering. The layering is achieved as the “underpainting” is overlaid with the same transparent photographic image, in essence an inversion of the traditional chiaroscuro technique.

Mackay examines, reworks and seeks new boundaries to the art he challenges, but then, takes the viewers through the spectrum and sequences of his challenge. At first viewing, one might think the seemingly endless visitations and revisitations to the original image are casual meditations and cogitations. They may in part be that, but they are also an attempt to pursue what as an artist he finds himself ever more deeply involved with as he struggles to understand both the work and his own aesthetic commitments. In a way, Mackay invites the viewer to be in the studio with him and see the inner workings of his day-to-day commitment to making art.



Poor Girl Triptych 2001, 3 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Most commentators on Mackay's *Source Derivations* works seem to assume that the central impulse for his work is reactive or reflective. Undoubtedly he is reacting to and reflecting on the works he chooses for the exhibitions, but my sense is that he is much less passive in his engagement with the work of other artists than has been noted. There is a certain ferocity to Mackay's approach to the chosen works. He distorts them, reinvents them, covers them up, cuts through them to basic shapes, takes away their colour, swaddles them in the colours that mean something to him, reproduces them until the image loses its uniqueness. In the case of **Source Derivations V** (subject: the Holgate head in the McMichael Collection), he drew *The Head* on the wall and scrawled under it "A corpse for the soul's return." One of the pieces, entitled *a corpse for the soul's return*, was a skull overlaid with an acetate photographic image of *The Head*. These are not the acts or words

of reverie. They are the weapons of an artist struggling with the genius of another artist's work, determined to recognize its strengths and ferret out its weaknesses and then create something new and wonderful.



Smith on the Rack 2001, 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Hagen on the Rack 2001, 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Habit Filter:
Allan Harding MacKay's
Source Derivations VII
(Smith and Hagen)

Ray Cronin

In a way, all art is both source and derivation. Artists don't create in a vacuum – sources of influence, points of reaction and contexts to shift are potentially infinite as art begets art in an ongoing cycle. Works of art also evolve over time, acquiring layers of interpretation, of habitual response and of scholarly erudition. All of this activity may subtly (or overtly) distort the work. It definitely mediates its apprehension by viewers. Habit is as much the enemy of the continued survival of a work of art as are environmental factors such as heat, light and dirt. Occasionally an artwork is in need of a good metaphorical scrubbing to strip away the accumulated layers of opinion, much as a fine art conservator will strip away layers of grime. One only has to look behind the scenes of an art gallery, to take a tour through the vaults, to find examples of what perceptual and intellectual habits can do to art works. The vaults at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, for instance, are full of works that have been orphaned by time, that have become almost invisible in their familiarity. The constant challenge to those of us charged with the stewardship of these works is to see them anew, not to let habit obscure the possibilities for new ideas and fresh interpretations latent in every work of art under our care.

That challenge can be daunting, and the AGNS has been fortunate in having artist Allan Harding MacKay as an ally. MacKay began the process that eventually became this exhibition while he was Artist-in-Residence. That history is reflected in the works on view; some were created at the gallery in 1999, the rest completed over the past year in Banff, Alberta.

In a manner of speaking, **Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen)** is an elaborate habit filter. MacKay's engagement with Edith Smith's *The Red Cloak* (1923) and Alice Egan Hagen's *Portrait of a Girl from the Halifax Poor House*



Smith Collage 2001, 27.9 x 21.6 cm

(c. 1890) is so intense as to force us to look at the two source works as if they are somehow new, because they have been transformed by the attention.

Ideally that sense of newness is imparted every time a work from the permanent collection is put on display. The intensity of focus and the passionate attention that MacKay brings to both his "sources" and his "derivations" is, in a way, the model of how curators hope to interact with art works. However, MacKay's art isn't in any way an illustration, ideal or otherwise, of the curatorial process. On the contrary, the *Source Derivation* series is anything but illustrative. MacKay makes the curatorial process manifest in objects, transforming the relationship between gallery and collection or audience and curator, distilling it down to a conversation between artist and artwork. Generously, it is a conversation in which the rest of us are invited to participate.

In **Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen)**, the conversation is primarily between Edith Smith and Allan Harding MacKay. In her day (she began art studies in 1890 and exhibited and taught until her death in 1954), she was probably the leading female artist in Nova Scotia, a tireless promoter of the arts and a respected teacher. She was in the first class of the newly minted Victoria School of Art and Design (VSAD), and eventually taught at that institution, now the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). She was a founding member of the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine

Arts Society (NSMFA), which became the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The NSMFA acquired Smith's *The Red Cloak*, generally considered her masterpiece, in 1923.¹ MacKay was aware of the painting from his student days at NSCAD², and perhaps from a stint working at the Centennial Gallery of Art, which exhibited works from the NSMFA collection in a powder magazine on Citadel Hill, and which was another precursor to the present-day AGNS.

Regardless of when he first saw her work, by the time MacKay was a student at NSCAD, Smith had been dead for almost twenty years and her style of art making ("traditional forms and techniques taught by little-known, conservative faculty"³), was being eclipsed by a new internationalist spirit. Smith, of course, had been an internationalist as well, and it was merely the passage of time that had transformed her interest in the advanced painting of her day into tradition.⁴

History abounds with that sort of irony, and irony too occasionally needs to be scraped off of art – like habit, as it accumulates it distorts. Interestingly, MacKay addresses this distortion, refocuses his "sources," through using actual distortion: warped perspectives generated through the camera lens. His series of works based on *The Red Cloak*, for instance, are based in fact on distorted photographs of Smith's painting, taken from varying angles while the canvas was hanging in place in the vault. Taken, too, with a flash, creating a corona that MacKay has worked up in almost every case, so that the evidence of the photographic process is as much a part of his work as is the evidence of Smith's process. These photographs were enlarged on a photocopier and worked over with paint and wax to further remove the images from their roots as mechanically produced representations. Finally, they were covered with a transparency of the original image, and spaced leaving a small gap so as to create actual depth to complement the virtual space of the picture. A hologram of sorts, the "derivations" shift as one walks by, the changing angle of view radically altering the look of the image.

The increase in scale, the distorting effects of photography, and the mediation of MacKay's own hand, serve to radically transform each image, creating a new facet to our understanding of Smith's painting with each new "derivation."

Alice Egan Hagen, known primarily for her painted ceramics (and for the small kiln building named for her at NSCAD), is less central to the conversation, as MacKay has only created three works based on her source painting. However, his triptych based on

Girl From the Halifax Poorhouse is perhaps more focussed for its apparent brevity. It's as if a long, somewhat meandering conversation was suddenly punctuated by a few well-placed words from a heretofore mute interlocutor, who then lapsed back into silence.

MacKay has long straddled the dual roles of artist and art administrator, and his project is one that draws as much on the role of curator as it does on his studio practice as an artist. His works are not site-specific in any traditional way (they will still exist in another context), but they certainly are institution specific, rooted in this gallery and linked with Smith and Hagen's paintings. **Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen)** challenges the viewer on many levels, not least on the very way that they look at a work of art. But perhaps more importantly, MacKay's *Source Derivations* challenge museums, turning the kind of critical analysis so important to contemporary art on the institutions themselves. Those of us in galleries can fall into the trap of habit as well; MacKay's new works provide a fresh perspective that reveals how much more we can still learn from two familiar old friends.

¹ Robert Stacy and Liz Wylie, *Eighty/Twenty: 100 Years of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1988) 49-50

² From a conversation with the artist, November 2001

³ Robert Stacy and Liz Wylie, *Eighty/Twenty: 100 Years of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1988) 77

⁴ Mora Dianne O'Neill, *Choosing Their Own Path: Canadian Women Impressionists* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2001)

List of Works

Allan Harding MacKay
all works collection of the artist

Smith Distortion Series 2001
ink jet, pastel, charcoal, wax, oil, on paper
ink jet overlay
11 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Poor Girl Triptych 2001
ink jet, pastel, charcoal, wax, oil, on paper,
ink jet overlay
3 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Smith Variations 1999
oil, charcoal, wax, pastel, reprography on paper
14 units, each: 43.2 x 27.9 cm

Smith Collage 2001
pastel, charcoal on paper, acetate, tacks
27.9 x 21.6 cm

Smith on the Rack 2001
ink jet, pastel, charcoal, wax, oil, on paper,
ink jet overlay
91.4 x 55.9 cm

Hagen on the Rack 2001
ink jet, pastel, charcoal, wax, oil, on paper
ink jet overlay
91.4 x 55.9 cm

Edith Smith (1867 - 1954)

The Red Cloak 1923
oil on canvas
45.0 x 33.5 cm
Purchased 1923
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Alice M. Egan Hagen (1872 - 1972)

Portrait of a Girl from the Halifax Poor House
c.1890
oil on canvas
40.8 x 30.5 cm
Gift of Rachel Dickinson, Bridgewater, NS, 1987
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia



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