

C Magazine  
Issue 34, Summer 1992  
Toronto, Ontario

## **ALLAN HARDING MACKAY**

Justin a M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, Toronto

What are we seeing? How can we look at this? These are not unusual questions for the viewer of an exhibition to pose. What is unusual in the case of the recent installation, *Source/Derivations II* by Allan Harding MacKay is that the artist is asking them. And thus, an intimate bond is created between artist and viewer, which is a strange, even disconcerting experience in our culture.

For surely western society is characterized by confrontation and opposition. Consider our legal system, our parliamentary government, culture vs. nature, male VS. female, logic vs. intuition, reason vs. faith, and so on. We are the *au contraire society* lampooned in Carroll's Tweedledee and Tweedledum. We agree to argue; we argue even when we agree.

Confrontation and argument function through polarization and exaggeration. Resolution comes through winning. The positions presented in an argument are based on closure - that is, the opponents attempt to create coherent and unassailable positions. This structure has been as much present in art as elsewhere. It is merely somewhat more subtly established. Artwork is often designed to challenge - to confront the viewer with the truth; to mystify, confuse or disorient; or to overwhelm through sheer monumentality - in other words, to take an unassailable position *vis à vis* the viewer. The viewer, at least as critic, has retreated to unassailable theory.

Urged on by the elitist posturing of theosophy, Lawren Harris cultivated the most unassailable of all positions - spiritual symbolism. Closure in message: who can challenge arcane spiritual truth discovered through the illumination of devotees? Closure in form: who can challenge the mathematical perfection of geometric form? Harris created disciples or enemies. More recently, he has been ignored.

As I see it, MacKay has refused to be disciple, enemy or indifferent. He has said, in effect, I want a conversation with this artist who has been central to the myths of Canadian identity but I reject confrontation and argument as a means of discourse. To have this conversation, Lawren Harris's work had to be opened up; his closure of meaning and form had to be renegotiated rather than rejected or opposed. As it turns out, MacKay is one of the great visual conversationalists.

I'll begin at the beginning. In front of Harris's painting, *Isolation Peak* (c. 1930), which is in the permanent collection at Hart House, MacKay has placed what he calls a viewing device. It is an ingenious device: a circle with an isosceles triangle cut out of it, placed on a stand. The triangular hole is reinforced and made less rigid and assertive by pieces of translucent paper punctured by irregular triangular cutouts. This viewing device is the key

to the installation. Through it, the viewer can see *Isolation Peak* simply as a triangle. Whereas Lawren Harris's mountain as triangle is full; MacKay's viewing triangle is empty. Harris's is to look at; MacKay's is to look through. And yet, not entirely to look through. The viewing device also defines, simplifies and, in a sense, summarizes. It is not oppositional. By moving, the viewer can view any area of the painting through the triangle. The roughly cut translucent paper underplays the geometry and clarity of the image. The triangle - that most inflexible of forms and most ancient of patriarchal symbols becomes available to shifts in form and meaning. MacKay opens up the painting, freeing it from its magisterial and authoritarian intent.

After this initial viewing, the rest of the exhibition is a long conversation in which *Isolation Peak* is the focus but is no longer a dogmatic assertion. It has had to give up its aloof authority and yield to examination.

Across the room from the painting with its viewing device are seven large paintings/drawings of *Isolation Peak*, in which MacKay frees the image from the painting. The "masterwork" (unique, final, authoritative) has been replicated seven times in large for-mat. The drawing lines are re-established and the freedom of the initial sketch is recovered. The image has been appropriated, not in order to give it new meaning or contextualize it, but to make it humanly accessible. The mystique of the finished work and the restrictiveness of one spiritual meaning are both set aside so that conversation can flow.

Once the axis of communication has been established, the conversation can begin. The non-linear, tangential nature of conversation, its alternating abruptness and fluidity, its personal twists and turns and, most of all, its openness to surprise and discovery are regularly underestimated in our quest for linear, efficient discourse. MacKay allows the non-linear, visual conversation with *Isolation Peak* to wend its way through typical categories of informed dialogue that we use to arrive at knowledge. And, it is a conversation full of surprises and excitements.

On tables, walls and shelves, MacKay lays out partially hidden, partially revealed writings and copies, photographs and diagrams of *Isolation Peak*. Some are curatorial commentary (*A Waxed Facsimile of the Curatorial File Relating to Lawren Harris's Isolation Peak*), some are archival references and some are visual representations (21 works on paper, seven bookworks). All of them have the gently probing, questioning, but never confrontational characteristics of good, intense conversation. The installation is a series of insights, allusions and illuminations. But mostly it is an opening gambit for a long and endless conversation we have to have with our own past.

*Terrence Heath*

**Captions:**

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY  
*Source/Derivations II* (1991)  
Installation view

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY  
*Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain* (1991)  
Pastel, wax & paper on wood