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CALGARY'S NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

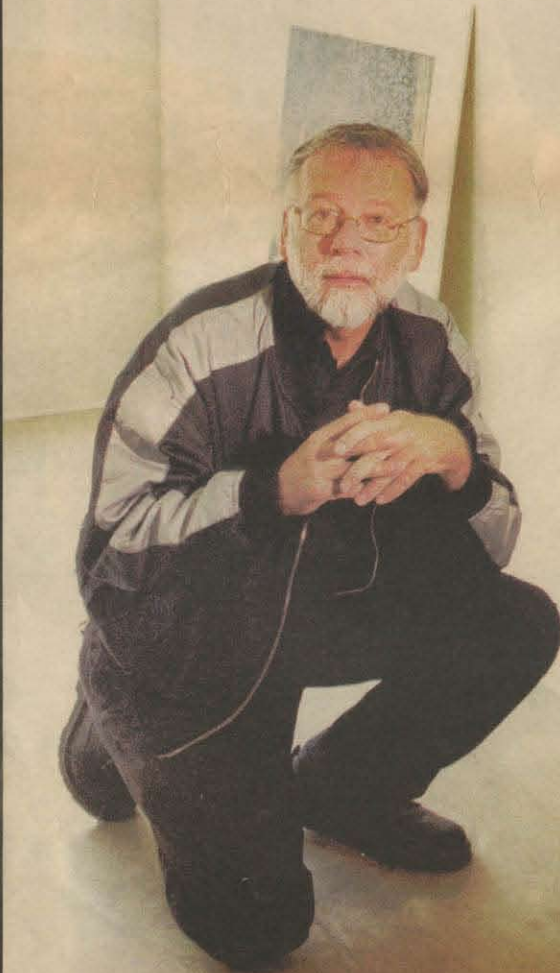
FREE EVERY THURSDAY

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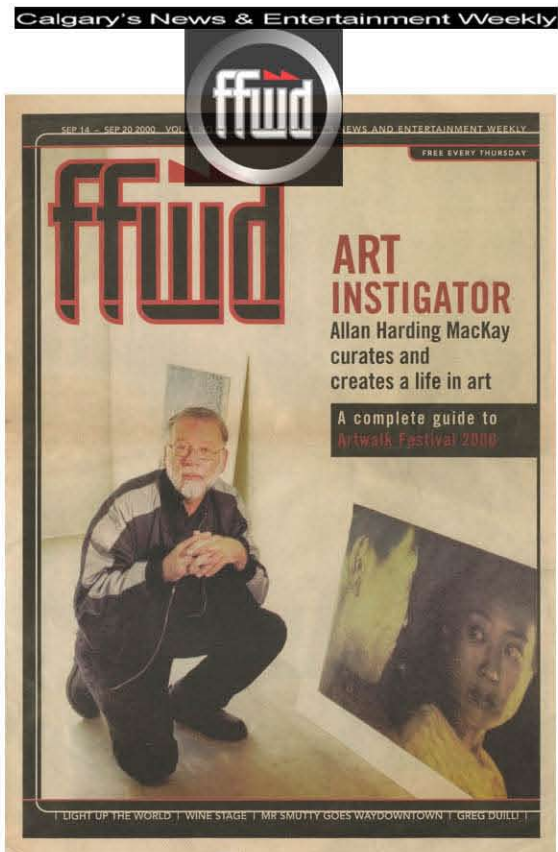
ART INSTIGATOR

Allan Harding MacKay
curates and
creates a life in art

A complete guide to
Artwalk Festival 2000



| LIGHT UP THE WORLD | WINE STAGE | MR SMUTTY GOES WAYDOWNTOWN | GREG DUILLI |



Visual Arts

by Monique Westra

Allan Harding MacKay
 The Talented Mr. MacKay
 A Tale of Two Cities (and two curators and two galleries)

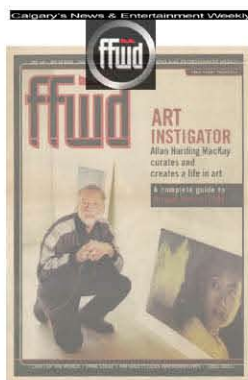
The pivotal exhibition of this year's Artwalk Festival is undoubtedly the Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art. The third survey of contemporary art in Alberta, it is generally considered to be the one of the most important indices of the visual arts climate. Since 1996, the Biennial has been a joint project of the Glenbow Museum and the Edmonton Art Gallery. Earlier this year, Glenbow's sudden decision to cancel the Calgary showing based on low attendance projections sent shock waves through the art community. The idea of a major cultural institution forfeiting a key exhibition to the bottom line seemed not only callous and shortsighted but, in many ways, an ominous sign of the times in profit-driven Alberta.

Despite the anxiety and pessimism engendered at that time, there is now a sense of excitement and optimism, owing in no small measure to the Biennial's miraculous resurrection. Two Calgary galleries, the Art Gallery of Calgary and the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, will host the massive show. The Biennial's two curators, Catherine Crowston of Edmonton and Allan Harding MacKay of Banff, have made this possible by dividing the work of 25 artists into two parts. While this arrangement may be disruptive for the viewer in terms of understanding the totality of the exhibition, MacKay feels that the distinctive architectural features of two very different spaces may actually enhance the viewing experience.

In fact, the success of the exhibition itself owes a great deal to the empathy between the two curators who made their choices together. Ideas were generated through the many conversations that took place between them and the dialogue they had with the artists. The process was stimulating, active, engaged and dynamic throughout the year that Crowston and MacKay worked together. They made 60 studio visits before narrowing down their choice to 25 artists. Crowston is first and foremost a curator while MacKay is... well, kind of hard to pin down.

MacKay will wear two hats when he is in Calgary this week. He will attend the opening of one show that he curated, and another that he created – his most recent work will be exhibited at the Paul Kuhn Gallery. This artist-curator duality is not unusual for MacKay – it is characteristic of a life in which several career tracks have converged and diverged over the course of his 30-year involvement with the arts in Canada.

He has accomplished a great deal as an art administrator or, as he puts it, "an instigator." In the '70s, he was the founding director of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge. In the '80s, he was a dynamic young director making big changes at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. In the '90s, he was director of the Power Plant in Toronto.



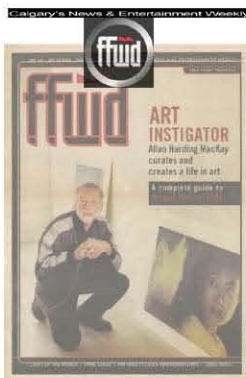
MacKay was also the project director of the Barnes exhibition, which was a blockbuster success for the Art Gallery of Ontario. This type of massive organizational undertaking – he was literally in charge of devising a strategic model for everything from promotion to ticket sales to display – requires not only a clear, logical mind, but also strength of character and uncompromising leadership. Yet, at the same time, this tough administrator was also an artist, whose work revealed a completely different facet of his character.

Allan MacKay the artist is poetic, reflective and sensitive. And it is MacKay the artist who stunned the art world when, in 1983, he quit his prestigious job as director of the Mendel to move to Switzerland and devote himself to his art and to his family. He returned to Canada five years later.

There is a dichotomy inherent in his art as well. While it is postmodern in terms of conception and theoretical complexity, it is traditional in its craftsmanship, exquisite beauty and poetry. MacKay's incredible drawing skills are the underpinning of his work. In the 1980s, he worked with landscapes and figures when these subjects were scorned by other contemporary artists. But his work was provocative because he always incorporated his stunning drawings and paintings within a conceptual framework.

He often worked in series and projects wherein he maintained control and, in effect, was his own curator. One critically acclaimed series was called Source/Derivations. In these site-specific installations, done over a number of years, MacKay responded, in various media, forms and on different scales, to one specific visual source that was his point of departure, creating within one space a totally integrated body of work united by a common theme. Three of the six Source/Derivations are based on Group of Seven paintings that are recontextualized and given new meaning through MacKay's ingenious manipulations of medium – drawings, paintings, photographs, mixed media, video – scale and subject. In another mammoth project, MacKay obsessively drew the countenances of hundreds of the most influential people in the 1980s Canadian art scene – a monumental 500-foot frieze of gigantic, over-lifesize faces of artists, curators, dealers, critics and teachers rendered in charcoal in bold and incisive drawings.

In 1993 MacKay was commissioned by the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program to document, through works of art, the humanitarian aid missions carried out by the Canadian Forces under United Nations direction. He was stationed with the Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia when the tragic events that led to the Somalia Inquiry occurred. Many of his works, primarily in photographic and video format, deal with this topic while other works focus on the ironic juxtaposition of high-tech military machinery and the everyday life of the Somali people – an incongruous conjunction of time and space. He was struck by the intense heat, the isolation and the desolation of this east African country. The collective work is called *Somalia Yellow* and has been featured prominently



in his art in the form of videos, drawings, collages and prints. It was also the basis of a theatrical collaboration with One Yellow Rabbit in 1997.

A job as the project director of the fledgling IMCA (Institute of Modern and Contemporary Art) had brought him to Calgary eight months earlier. But with no money in place to implement any plans, the need for a project director seemed premature. So MacKay left Calgary for Banff, where he still lives. He concentrated on his art for two years, then he was interrupted by his appointment as the co-curator of the Biennial. He found the curatorial work to be stimulating and satisfying. For MacKay, curating is a creative endeavour. His most recent collection, showing at the Paul Kuhn Gallery, is primarily made up of intimate close-ups of female faces and torsos set against a black ground, sharply illuminated by an intense yellow light. The effect, reminiscent of Baroque chiaroscuro, is beautiful and haunting. All the images are actually reflections in a mirror, and some works feature a model who scrutinizes her own reflected image. They raise issues about illusion and reality.

The history of art is reflected in MacKay's superb drawing and painting style as well as the figures, the poses, the compositions, the cropping, the lighting and the mysterious ambience. This effect is achieved by an original layering technique which begins with a colour slide transformed into a black-and-white laser copy that is, in turn, reinterpreted with charcoal and pastel in a very vigorous drawing style. The surface of the drawing is brushed and splattered with melted wax that is overlaid and highlighted with oil paint. The resulting texture is visceral and contrasts with the literalness of the image.

One spectacular and stunning work is an inversion of this technique – here, a Plexiglas sheet imprinted with a black-and-white photographic image of a young woman's face is positioned in front of the exact same image rendered in colour in charcoal and pastel, creating depth and distortion. It features a mesmerizing female face, glancing furtively back over her shoulder in a pose that looks like Vermeer but is disquieting in its sense of mounting tension.

Allan MacKay will be speaking about The Alberta Biennial: The Curatorial Process on Tuesday, September 19 from 12:10 to 12:50 p.m. at the Art Gallery of Calgary, and from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, ACAD.

The Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art
Art Gallery of Calgary and Illingworth Kerr Gallery
September 15 - October 15