

# Faces, Names, Words



## Some Critical Countenances

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They are all here,<sup>1</sup> the *important* people of the Canadian art world, ranged along 165 metres of brown wrapping paper: from Michael Snow to Carmen Lamanna, from Edythe Goodridge to Liz Magor. Here is Pierre Th  berge, sandwiched full-face between Flora MacDonald and his own left and right profiles; there is Garry Neill Kennedy (who appears four times) sketched in trembling, schizoid lines, either shaking or laughing to himself. Diana Nemiroff is polished up like Princess Di, while Ron Shuebrook is deeply shaded into abstraction; Russell Keziere waves expressive hands to make a point, while Carol Moppett, staring at the viewer, shades her eyes as if dazzled by what she sees.

But — wait a minute — they are *not* all here . . . If there is Dennis Reid and John Bentley Mays, where are Philip Monk and Ian Carr-Harris? If Peggy Gale is included, why not Elke Town? If this is a litany of the critically significant now, what determined the selection? We know who is included and who is not without necessarily recognizing their features, because their names are conveniently scribbled beneath each oversize portrait. We are meant to know who is there. At this point, we remind ourselves that the exhibit is titled *Some Critical Countenances* (emphasis here on the *some*), and pause to ponder the audacity of the endeavour and the point of tilting the Canadian Art Establishment in this manner.

This exhibit is the outcome of a collaboration. Allan Harding MacKay, artist and gallery director, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, critic and anthropologist, each approach the issue of 'official portraiture' from their own experience and erudition. In the process, they not only provide a historical record, a critical essay, and an exceptionally long piece of art, but also serve to illustrate their theses by personifying, in themselves, the collision of word and image — the continuing power-struggle between artistic and critical endeavour.

### The Countenances

The phenomenological experience of the running portrait itself precedes the experience of the collaborative text. Physically and technically, this is an impressive work. MacKay is a gifted draftsman, facile, clever, seductive. Small reproductions do not do justice to the quality of his marks or the easy fluidity of his gestures. Close up, paint splatters and charcoal smears, casual dribbles and deftly worked tonal passages unfold in apparently effortless variation along the 1.5 metre-wide roll.

Each 'critical countenance' is someone whom MacKay met and photographed

during numerous 'research' trips to Canada from his previous residence in Switzerland. The slides were then randomly chosen and their information translated onto the paper with as little interest in individual personalities as possible. There was to be no discernible hierarchy of images; no importance attached to the degree of 'finish' of individual portraits or to the

(even if she finds the representations of herself unflattering). But what is it, beyond a chronic compulsion to ham it up, that has driven MacKay, who has a full head of hair, to portray himself as a balding pedant with a blind eye?

It is less than ten years since Benjamin Buchloh contended that "the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contem-



Allan Harding MacKay, from *Some Critical Countenances* (1987-89), mixed media on paper, 1.5 x 165 m, photo: Steve Zwerling, courtesy Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

number of times a person appeared. Apparently, the overall concern was that of style; the decisions were formal, aesthetic. In the production of this work, then, face followed face in a relatively haphazard fashion, and the scroll ended, after two years of prodigious labour, only because the arbitrary deadline for the exhibit had arrived.

The result is all very arty, in a populist way. Visages full of shiny highlights or deep shadows, like those a camera flattens into indeterminacy, are followed by speedy contours and cut-out profiles. Sometimes a written text is scrubbed out or an attempt at decoration has been reconsidered — MacKay's own self-consciousness compels him to ham it up visually when things get too earnest. The style alludes to movie-poster art and similar device-ridden aspects of commercial image-making, which should engender a certain cynicism in the viewer. Yet, strangely, these candid portraits have the feel of real people caught in the act of being, not posing: the expression of alert anxiety on Brenda Wallace's face, for example, or the softly pastel respect accorded to Doris Shadbolt's wrinkles. MacKay (or, more properly, the slides from which he has drawn his information) has been flattering to some, unkind to others, but nearly all the portraits are enlivened by a genuine sense of humanity. The viewer's cynicism, when it occurs, relates more to the choice of subject matter than to its treatment.

MacKay has worked as a professional portrait-painter, and his other figurative works have almost always included some form of portraiture: himself, his friends growing up in PEI, or himself with Ferdinand Hodler, a Swiss modernist, in an ironic master-student relationship. As a curator, gallery director, and artist, MacKay is familiar with many aspects of the Canadian art world, so it is reasonable that his autobiographical figurative concerns should now include those who define and populate his chosen milieu. That he sees fit to include himself and his collaborating critic in the works seems entirely logical

porary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production . . . because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness."<sup>2</sup> For artists who choose to work in the figurative tradition, varieties of expressionism aside, the celebrated pluralism and seemingly limitless possibilities of post-modernism shrink to grudging dimensions. Before the Fall (i.e., before the subsumption of 'modernism' by 'post-'), permission to use representation was granted provided one was 'flat' and 'disinterested' (which often meant interposing the technology of the camera between artist and image, to abstract and neutralize), and now permission is conditional upon a demonstration that the project is really 'subversive' or 'deconstructive'.

For MacKay the dilemma may be this simple. On the one hand, he has a 'literal talent', nurtured at NSCAD in the pre-Kennedy era, and a conviction that much can be said using traditional means, even now. On the other hand, his experience as Director of NSCAD's Anna Leonowens Gallery during the early years of conceptualism, and his subsequent involvement in all aspects of the art world, not to mention his own intellectual skills as a wit and wordsmith, all conspire to engender self-doubt and second-guessing. As Townsend-Gault remarks, "When MacKay talks, it's as though he erases half of what he says." While more fluid in his visual work, he nevertheless employs some techniques equivalent to erasure.

MacKay may well be as unimpressed by Buchloh's assertions as he was by the repetitive strategies and limited means of NSCAD-style conceptualism. Even so, something has rubbed off, so to speak, because the very process he has chosen — a randomized set of images, presented according to a time-consuming formula, adhered to and completed to exhaustion — echoes, at least structurally, some conceptual art procedures. But, with MacKay, the work is not quite completed to exhaustion, and therefore it has not aspired to the level of exquisite boredom necessary to create the disengagement typical of such work. Even in his choice of methodology, MacKay demonstrates a kind of organic engagement (which explains why the portraits are moving, despite attempts at neutrality)