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## War artist sees dark side



JEFF GOODALE/TORONTO STAR

**SOMALIA SCENES:** Allan Harding MacKay and four drawings of soldiers and Somalis he made in 1992 when serving as official Canadian war artist.

'Everyone in camp knew something that I didn't'

By CHRISTOPHER HUME  
ART CRITIC

When Allan Harding MacKay travelled to Somalia in 1992 as an official war artist, he went expecting to document a peacekeeping effort.

But at some point during his stay, he, like millions of other Canadians, realized the situation was not all it seemed.

"We would've come back with a very positive image," says the Toronto multi-media artist, "except for what happened at the end. We had all bought into the idea that this was a humanitarian mission."

MacKay, 50, who was in Somalia for two weeks in March, 1992, was the latest in a long line of Canadian war artists that includes some of the country's most celebrated painters: David Milne, Alex Colville and Lauren Harris.

MacKay was in Somalia when 16-year-old Shidone Arone was beaten to death by Canadian soldiers. He also was there when Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee of the now disbanded Canadian Airborne Regiment later tried to hang himself.

"We were at a briefing near the detention centre in Belet Huen," MacKay recalls, "when all of a sudden this ambulance roars up. We broke away from the briefing to see what was going on... and saw Matchee being removed after trying to kill himself. It was the first indication of the darker side of the Canadian presence."

Up to then, MacKay had spent his time touring the country, viewing the landscape from the back of an armored vehicle in the company of



heavily armed militia. He watched and took pictures as Canadian soldiers cleared blocked wells, repaired school-house roofs, dispensed medical care, gathered weapons.

"Though things had cooled down by the time I got there, you couldn't go anywhere without an armed escort. In a sense, we were given a guided tour. What I witnessed were humanitarian efforts."

"But later, after I got back to Canada and the whole story came out, I began to wonder what I had actually experienced while I was there. I realized in retrospect that everyone in camp knew something that I didn't. And I had been thinking, 'Gee, they're such nice people.'"

It wasn't that MacKay went to Somalia with any illusions about soldiers and war. His father served in World War II, his older brother was killed in Korea. What attracted him was the idea of an army in a peacekeeping role.

"I believe the Canadian military has a will to serve in a humanitarian capacity," he says. "But the troops were frustrated by the lack of a clear mandate. The big issue among them was the U.N. mandate."

According to MacKay, "They shouldn't have had these elite troops guarding a compound. They're the kind of guys who'd rather be dropped into combat." Instead, the Airborne soldiers passed the time collecting arms — everything from World

War I rifles to AK-47s — and trying to "stabilize" the situation. But that's not to excuse what took place.

"I agree with the decision to disband the Airborne," MacKay states unequivocally. "A few bad apples had tainted its reputation. There was clearly a management problem."

Nonetheless, MacKay is thankful for the experience. A former director of the Power Plant contemporary art gallery at Harbourfront and a member in good standing of the Toronto art community, he never set out to be a war artist.

"It all came out of an idle question about whether Canada still had war artists."

"When I met the curator of the Canadian War Museum in summer '91, I was told, no, we don't. Then I heard about CARFAC (Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Art Program), which contracts artists to do illustrations of military activities. A lot of my work is literal, so I fitted that requirement."

Once he had applied, acceptance came quickly. In return for four finished drawings, MacKay was flown to Somalia and made a temporary captain. The work itself falls roughly into several categories: drawings, collages and a 19-minute

video titled *Somalia Yellow*. The drawings are straight-forward sketches of soldiers and Somalis. Realistic yet expressive, they are a record of what the artist saw first-hand.

The collages are more probing pieces that question the nature of Canadian and U.N. involvement in the civil war. Made up of photographs, newspaper clippings and drawn fragments, they are multi-layered works animated by the contradictions between events and their depiction.

One particularly dramatic series of collages is based on an episode MacKay witnessed early one morning in the abattoir of Belet Huen: A woman approaches a calf as it's slaughtered to fill a bowl with the blood gushing from its neck. She then takes the bowl to a small boy standing nearby and slowly pours the contents over his head.

As grotesque as it may seem to squamous Western eyes, MacKay says the purpose is to make the child well again.

"There are two kinds of bloodbaths going on in Somalia," he explains. "One is the killing and the maiming, the other is the ancient healing process I witnessed that morning in the abattoir."

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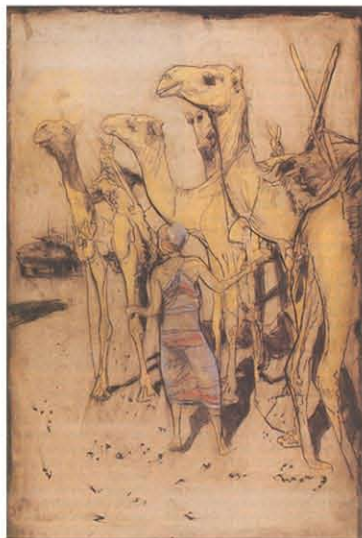
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**Somalia scenes:**  
Drawings of soldiers and Somalis MacKay made in 1992 when serving as official Canadian war artist.