

VARSAITY REVIEW
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BY ROXANNE CHEE

Source/Derivations II
by Allan Harding Mackay
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Familiar Land

Stepping into the room, your eyes meet with a row of seven unlike panels of a familiar landscape image, Group of Seven's Lawren Harris *Isolation Peak* (c. 1930). The original (part of the Hart House Permanent Collection) hangs on the opposite wall, well-lit in all altogether dimlit space.

Arranged along the remaining walls is a series of smaller framed works on paper whose white dominated interiors emphasize the ever-present peaks. Nearby, on a wooden table rests books works. A structure titled *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain* stands before the original canvas, lending a sculptural component to the exhibition.

What becomes obvious after some perusal is that these relative interpretations of a provocative Canadian landscape image represent more than studies on a familiar theme. Rather, they constitute exploration into the meaning of place and the ideal, particularly as it is affected and changed by time, in history and in the Canadian imagination.

The artist responsible for this mixed-media installation, *Source/Derivations II* on view at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is Allan Harding MacKay, a Prince Edward Island born artist and gallery director. MacKay takes a popular landscape icon and develops a series of "derivations" based on the "source." In this sense, the painting itself becomes MacKay's motivation rather than nature which was Harris' inspiration.

Perhaps he understands the past as a living thing, carried within all of us that compelled MacKay to retrace Harris' train journey from Toronto to the Rockies. Assuming the "railway-eye-view" of the times, MacKay travels back to the earliest moment of creation. There at Jasper National Park, he photographed the site and witnessed the raw materials that went into Harris' canvas, altogether recovering, a mind searching for connections and meaning in his environment, a mind engaged in composing. Like Harris, MacKay too returns to his Toronto studio to synthesize his findings and develop his interpretations of the landscape.

The results speak for themselves. The panels, similar in construction and composition to the original but finished in palettes of greens and yellows, blues, purple-blacks, and russets are the immediate response to the "source" work. After some deliberation and mental comparison, what becomes apparent is that Harris' unique vision of the Canadian landscape

rather than MacKay's "derivations" feels right in every sense, that somehow everything about *Isolation Peak* was meant to be exactly as it is -the composition, the cool blue-white palette, the oil medium, the pronounced contours, the simple beauty. The *Viewing Device For a Perfect Mountain* stands before the original, allowing the watcher to frame and examine each aspect of this "perfect mountain."

MacKay's point is well-taken: Changing any element of the mythic image not only makes for a new image, but challenges the significance of the existing one. By distorting the ideal, the heroic and mythic dimensions we associate with the form becomes subdued in the imagination, and eventually in our art. Imagine the implications for Canadian art had the ideal peak been different.

In the book works and works on paper, the artist deals broadly with the issues and methods of documentation, how they affect our perception of place and the landscape. Hence, the documentary quality pervading the show. Essentially, the book works are magazines or art publications about *Isolation Peak*. Like a shroud, paraffin wax encases the pages, blanketing the text, save for select words like "Isolation Peak represents" and the photographic reproduction of the peak itself. Even so, the image is further disfigured by wax splashes, etchings, cut-outs, slashes. MacKay's treatment of books demonstrate the futility of words, how, with time, words become "waxed over", fade and fail to carry meaning. But, the wordless image, despite deformation, continues to loom large in the geography of the land and the imagination, always pushing through to give meaning to that rare thing known as Canadian identity.

The works on paper undergo a similar treatment: obscured behind sheets of semi-opaque semi-transparent draughtsman tracing paper, the mountain is revealed as tracings in outline or through incisions and rips, folded back and weighted with wax. Despite its disjointed, even mutilated shape, the form is unmistakably *Isolation Peak*. Although there is much attempt at concealing and obscuring, simultaneously, there is also an effort to erect, excavate, even combust the image through the layers of paraffin and paper. This paradoxical treatment of an idealized Canadian image acts as metaphor for our schizophrenic Canadian consciousness, where there is at once a need to embrace nature and the land while outrightly rejecting it. Regardless, the images of the Canadian landscape forged by Harris and the Group of Seven lingers, remaining an essential part of the collected identity.

From *Source/Derivations II*, one gets the impression of the artist coming to terms with the past and with the mythic images that dominate and define what is Canadian. By recreating those images, in essence, Mackay is owning them and making them real to himself, and hopefully, to us.