Image courtesy of Paul Kuhn Gallery

Tied to the Mast

Seductive sirens make passionate portraits

Patricia Robertson Photos

New Figurative Works
By Allan Harding MacKay
Paul Kuhn Gallery
September 14 to October 7, 2000

"I have always been interested in portraiture," says **Allan Harding MacKay** of the series of works occupying his time and energy for the past two years. "It arises out of the work I began in art school on the figure. The body is a sight of structure, drama, and form. I am revisiting those interests. I am using photographic techniques to give me the structural fidelity of the image." Underlying MacKay's academic language is the push and pull of desire, the pulse of the pregnant pause between breaths, the unmediated gaze of the voyeur; all exquisitely executed by a mature artist in full command of his talent.

MacKay's latest series **New Figurative Works** is a stunning example of what all provocative portraiture aims to achieve: to capture the heart and soul of its subject. In this case, MacKay's subject is a collaborative series of depictions of women: all beautiful, all knowing, and very seductive. These women are the elusive sea maids, the sirens that sing their sibilant sonatas to the lonely sailors, looking out hopefully through the mist, lost in a sea of desire. MacKay's work reflects the mythic and often palpable tension between masculine and feminine, artist and muse, sailor and siren.

I must have spent an entire hour transfixed in front of the mural section entitled "Wall Display" at his opening at **Paul Kuhn Gallery**. MacKay has carefully presented competing images of women in various states: getting dressed with curlers, looking in the mirror, kneeling with hand gently poised on belly, protectively curled up on a pillow;

> "walk here girl
> where everything
> answers your nakedness."
> — Kenneth White

some with necks exposed, tilted faces in repose, torsos stretched, limbs askew, legs crossed protectively, arms raised, breasts bare. Many of the women have studiously avoided his gaze (which I attribute to his instruction), with the exception of one daring mature subject who glares back at the artist with the intensity of a woman scorned. She is modestly cloaked in a shiny silk bathrobe which offsets the vast landscape of taut skin and flesh of his younger, more nubile subjects.

What distinguishes these lush nudes from the magazine pages hidden under the mattress is that the photos reveal an ardent love for the subject. The dividing line between art and pornography, beauty and exploitation, is carefully navigated. MacKay's work is lovely, lyrical, and well-wrought. This kind of portraiture is a geography of longing, a tribute to desire, exemplifying the pull of the feminine mystique for the viewer and the artist.

The texture and raw beauty of MacKay's sensuous portraits makes them easily the best works I've seen in Calgary this year. The base of the dark charcoal brushwork complements the edgy black and white photos MacKay works over using white highlights and lovely pastel yellows, reds, and soft greens with vivid results. The images are then fixed with a beeswax layer, resulting in a lush and tactile illustration of evocative feminine beauty.

• **Patricia Robertson**