SOURCE/DERIVATIONS VII
(Smith and Hagen)

Edith Smith (1867 - 1954)
The Red Cloak 1923

Alice M. Egan Hagen
(1872 - 1972)
Portrait of a Girl from the Halifax Poor House c.1890

Installation view: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Ray Cronin

In a way, all art is both source and derivation. Artists don't create in a vacuum – sources of influence, points of reaction and contexts to shift are potentially infinite as art begets art in an ongoing cycle. Works of art also evolve over time, acquiring layers of interpretation, of habitual response and of scholarly erudition. All of this activity may subtly (or overtly) distort the work. It definitely mediates its apprehension by viewers.

Habit is as much the enemy of the continued survival of a work of art as are environmental factors such as heat, light and dirt. Occasionally an artwork is in need of a good metaphorical scrubbing to strip away the accumulated layers of opinion, much as a fine art conservator will strip away layers of grime. One only has to look behind the scenes of an art gallery, to take a tour through the vaults, to find examples of what perceptual and intellectual habits can do to art works. The vaults at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, for instance, are full of works that have been orphaned by time, that have become almost invisible in their familiarity. The constant challenge to those of us charged with the stewardship of these works is to see them anew, not to let habit obscure the possibilities for new ideas and fresh interpretations.

The AGNS has been fortunate in having artist Allan Harding MacKay as an ally in this daunting challenge. MacKay began the process that eventually became this exhibition while he was Artist-in-Residence. That history is reflected in the works on view; some were created at the gallery in 1999, the rest completed over the past year in Banff, Alberta.

Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen) is an elaborate habit filter. MacKay's engagement with Edith Smith's *The Red Cloak* (1923) and Alice Egan Hagen's *Portrait of a Girl from the Halifax Poor House* (c. 1890) is so intense as to force us to look at the two source works as if they are somehow new, because they have been transformed by his attention.

Ideally that sense of newness is imparted every time a work from the permanent collection is put on display. The intensity of focus and the passionate attention that MacKay brings to both his "sources" and his "derivations" is, in a way, the model of how curators hope to interact with art works. However, MacKay's art isn't in any way an illustration, ideal or otherwise, of the curatorial process. On the contrary, the *Source Derivation* series is anything but illustrative. MacKay makes the curatorial process manifest in objects, transforming the relationship between gallery and collection or audience and curator, distilling it down to a conversation

Source/Derivations [Smith and Hagen], 2001
charcoal, wax, reprography on paper

Installation view: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Source/Derivations [Smith and Hagen], 2001
oil pastel on paper

between artist and artwork. Generously, it is a conversation in which the rest of us are invited to participate.

In Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen), the conversation is primarily between Edith Smith and Allan Harding MacKay.

Smith began art studies in 1890 and exhibited and taught until her death in 1954), she was probably the leading female artist in Nova Scotia, a tireless promoter of the arts and a respected teacher. She was in the first class of the newly minted Victoria School of Art and Design (VSAD), and eventually taught at that institution, now the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). She was a founding member of the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts Society (NSMFA), which became the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The NSMFA acquired Smith's *The Red Cloak*, generally considered her masterpiece, in 1923.[1] MacKay was aware of the painting from his student days at NSCAD,[2] and perhaps from a stint working at the Centennial Gallery of Art, which exhibited works from the NSMFA collection in a powder magazine on Citadel Hill, and which was another precursor to the present-day AGNS.

By the time MacKay was a student at NSCAD, Smith had been dead for almost twenty years and her style of art making ("traditional forms and techniques taught by little-known, conservative faculty"),[3] was being eclipsed by a new internationalist spirit. Smith, of course, had been an internationalist as well, and it was merely the passage of time that had transformed her interest in the advanced painting of her day into tradition.[4]

History abounds with that sort of irony, and irony too occasionally needs to be scraped off of art – like habit, as it accumulates it distorts. Interestingly, MacKay addresses this distortion, refocuses his "sources," through using actual distortion: warped perspectives generated through the camera lens.

His series of works based on *The Red Cloak*, for instance, are based in fact on distorted photographs of Smith's painting, taken from varying angles while the canvas was hanging in place in the vault. Taken, too, with a flash, creating a corona that MacKay has worked up in almost every case, so that the evidence of the photographic process is as much a part of his work as is the evidence of Smith's process.

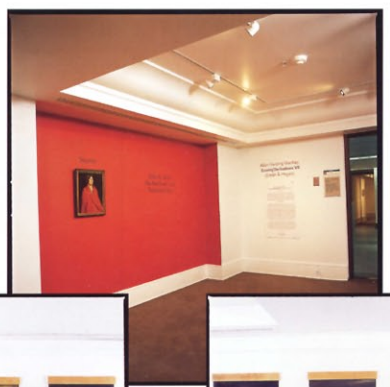
These photographs were ink jet printed and worked over with paint and wax to further remove the images from their roots as mechanically produced representations. Finally, they were covered with an ink jet transparency of the original image, and spaced leaving a small gap so as to create actual depth to complement the virtual space of the picture. A hologram of sorts, the "derivations" shift as one walks by, the changing angle of view radically altering the look of the image.

Installation view: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

The increase in scale, the distorting effects of photography, and the mediation of MacKay's own hand, serve to radically transform each image, creating a new facet to our understanding of Smith's painting with each new "derivation."

Alice Egan Hagen, know primarily for her painted ceramics (and for the small kiln building named for her at NSCAD), is less central to the conversation, as MacKay has only created three works based on her source painting. However, his triptych based on *Girl From the Halifax Poorhouse* is perhaps more focussed for its apparent brevity. It's as if a long, somewhat meandering conversation was suddenly punctuated by a few well-placed words from a heretofore mute interlocutor, who then lapsed back into silence.

MacKay has long straddled the dual roles of artist and art administrator, and his project is one that draws as much on the role of curator as it does on his studio practice as an artist. His works are not site-specific in any traditional way (they will still exist in another context), but they certainly are institution specific, rooted in this gallery and linked with Smith and Hagen's paintings that are in the collection.



Smith Distortion Series 2001,
11 units, each: 91.4 x 55.9 cm

Source/Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen) challenges the viewer on many levels,not least on the very way that they look at a work of art. But perhaps more importantly, MacKay's *Source Derivations* challenge museums, turning the kind of critical analysis so important to contemporary art on the institutions themselves. Those of us in galleries can fall into the trap of habit as well; MacKay's new works provide a fresh perspective that reveals how much more we can still learn from two familiar old friends..

Installation view of works on paper and charcoal wall drawing:
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Detail view of works on paper

1 Robert Stacy and Liz Wylie, *Eighty/Twenty: 100 Years of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1988) 49-50

2 From a conversation with the artist, November 2001

3 Robert Stacy and Liz Wylie, *Eighty/Twenty: 100 Years of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1988) 77

4 Mora Dianne O'Neill, *Choosing Their Own Path: Canadian Women Impressionists* (Halifax, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2001)

Allan Harding MacKay

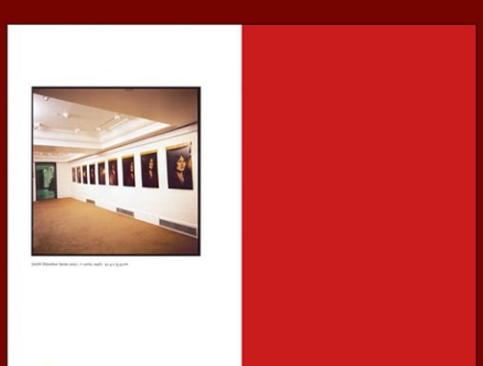
Source Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen)

In 1999 Alberta-based artist Allan Harding MacKay was artist-in-residence at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. While in residence, he began a series of works based on Edith Smith's *The Red Cloak*, a 1923 painting in the Gallery's collection. This series, exhibited in progress at the time of his residency, revisits Smith's depiction of a woman wrapped in a red cloak.

This forthcoming exhibition will be the seventh in MacKay's *Source Derivation* series, an ongoing investigation of Canadian art history, seen through the specific filter of MacKay's own art. MacKay, a curator and former gallery director, in addition to his career as a working artist, has spent the last 12 years on his *Source Derivation* series.

The first show, 19 89, took Tom Thomson's *Northern River* as its launching point. For *Source/Derivations II* in 1992, he studied Lawren Harris's painting *Isolation Peak*. The Art Gallery of Windsor's remarkable *As dark as the grave werein my friend is laid* by London, Ontario artist Ron Benner was the starting point for *Source/Derivations III*. *Source/Derivations IV* used August Rodin's sculpture *Balzac* (a departure from MacKay's self-imposed limit of Canadian art as source material), while *Source/Derivation V* returned to Canadian art with Group of Seven member Edwin Holgate's *The Head*. The last exhibition in this series, held at the Glenbow Museum responded to 3 woodcuts by W.J. Phillips as its source.

Toronto critic and curator Robert Stacey has written extensively on MacKay's project, most notably in the book produced by the Art Gallery of Windsor that accompanied *Source/Derivations III*. MacKay's project is potentially, limitless, Stacey observes, as there is no end of "other" art to observe and contemplate. "Art being news that stays news, the wellspring of potential sources remains inexhaustible, the supply of fresh derivations no less limitless, so long as two factors are present: inspiration and opportunity."

Ray Cronin
Curator of Contemporary Art

Source/Derivations VII (Smith and Hagen),1999
charcoal wall drawing