

Allan Harding MacKay

Somalia Yellow Vignettes

Stride Gallery January 9 - 31, 1998

In March 1993, the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program commissioned professional artist Allan Harding MacKay to document, through works of art, Operation Deliverance and Cordon; humanitarian aid missions carried out by the Canadian Forces under United Nations direction.

During the MacKay's travels in Somalia, the artist's time was spent primarily in the operating environment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. His overall resounding impression of his experience was the extraordinary combination of western military technology superimposed on the natural simplicities of Somali life. The artist has used this motif repeatedly throughout his work, juxtaposing high military machinery and might against scenes of everyday life in Somalia.

The timing of his assignment coincided with the torture death of a Somali teenager and the attempted suicide of Master Corporal Clayton Matchee, in the Canadian compound in Belet Huen. The artist's and journalists' witnessings of the removal of Master Corporal Matchee from the holding cell after his attempted suicide precipitated many events including the establishment of the Somalia Inquiry; the shattering of a national myth of idealized Canadian Peacekeeping behaviour; a major national soul searching concerning leadership and responsibility in the military establishment; and promises of continuing high-level political repercussions yet to unfold as independent journalistic revelations are published.

In addition to creating images alluding to these unfortunate events in Somalia, some of MacKay's works pay attention to the conditions and efforts of the majority of Canadian Peacekeepers to achieve the goals of their humanitarian mission. The artist's imagery and choice of media reflect the intense human struggle for survival against the isolation, heat and the desolation of East Africa. Importantly, MacKay's Somalia works honor the Somali people's survival as a traditional society in the extremes and cycles of a harsh natural environment infected with the violence of civil war.

