

## CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN ART-MAKING

BY LINDA GENEUX

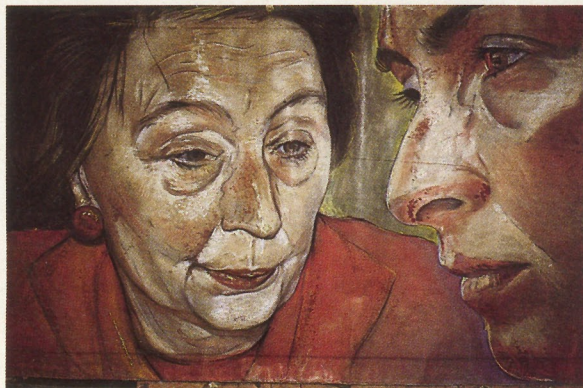
The use of secondary sources such as photographs from news stories or magazines, traditional portraiture, landscape painting or family photographs has become common practice for artists working today. Janice Gurney and Allan Harding MacKay are two such artists who specifically use images and language to communicate with their audience.

In the 1980s the terms "representation" and "appropriation" were used by artists and critics to distinguish this new direction in art-making. Abstraction had lost its power to communicate with the viewer as it became increasingly reduced in colour and form while it no longer filled the need of an audience that wanted content within art. The more personal issue of an individual's place in society rose to the forefront, and rather than responding with an expressive interpretation, many artists looked to the information systems in society, to see how their composition and structuring affected the meaning of what was being represented.

In order to examine these meanings, artists have been irreverent in their use of images, adopting whatever suits their purpose. Just as Andy Warhol reproduced the Campbell Soup can to serve as his symbol of North American consumer society, Gurney uses photography, painting and evocative passages of text mainly produced by others, while MacKay takes his own photographs and first traces them onto paper by illuminating them through a slide projector.

Gurney's mix of images are a personal melding of her own history and the perspective of a female artist. Brought up in Manitoba, she moved to Toronto in 1980 and began exploring her family background through her work. Gurney's family came to Canada from England after the First World War and started homesteading in Badger, Manitoba. She knew little about her family background as she was growing up. "It was much more a present-tense kind of life," she recalls of her childhood. When her grandmother died she began to look at family photographs, piecing together what each meant without ever having had an intimate knowledge of the people. "What I had were remnants that I use in my work — photographs of my grandmother as a child and my grandfather from the First World War."

This process of searching led to works such as *The Last Tasmanians*, which uses a vintage photograph of her father and grandparents when they first arrived at what would become their new home and juxtaposes it to a photograph that Gurney found of the last known Tasmanian natives. The third component of the work is a textual artwork created by London, Ontario artist Greg Curnoe. Although the oversized words in Curnoe's artwork do not



**Above:** In *The Last Tasmanians*, Janice Gurney uses a photograph of her father and grandparents and juxtaposes it to a photograph of Tasmanian natives. This, along with a textual artwork by artist Greg Curnoe, looks at the growth of her own family and extended relationships. Courtesy of Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

**Below:** Allan Harding MacKay uses photography as his primary source, then moves from a factual rendition of his subject to a gestural drawing. Courtesy of the artist.

read as a complete idea, they are part of his diaristic format which evokes a sense of questioning, much in the same way that Gurney looks at her own life through female eyes and changing geographic locations.

There is a sense of inheritance that runs throughout Gurney's work. She often uses commissioned or existing artworks, in particular paintings, by artists who she knows and who are her friends. "I can feel the brushmark and their hand in the work, so that way I have another way of looking at the world," explains Gurney. This is not only the experience of Gurney, but is shared by her audience, who must rely on their visual senses to draw a conclusion. "Everybody will complete the work in a different way," she adds. "You don't have to know where everything comes from, you can structure your own meaning."

For Allan Harding MacKay the genre of portraiture is a rich source of expression. During the years 1986 to 1988 he worked on a series of portraits of other Canadian artists and art world figures for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. In its entirety the drawing ended up being 545 feet long, although by the time of his next exhibition it was reduced to three sacks of shredded paper on a gallery floor.

MacKay's decision to make such a provocative statement is far more than overstated drama. By shrinking what was a room-full of drawing to an almost insignificant quantity of shreds he questions our perception of power and how it is altered by shifts of scale.

This sort of conceptual activity began for MacKay in Nova Scotia in the late '60s, and for the next 15 years he worked on paper, using pigment, old books and a variety of materials, including wax, to layer his surfaces with colour and texture. In turn, they create their own history. In 1983, though, he moved from Western Canada to Switzerland and became absorbed in the landscape. While there he began taking slides and projecting them onto enormous sheets of paper. These images provided the "structural fidelity" that he felt was lost through eye-hand coordination in drawing. It's the polarity between the premeditated action of tracing and his intuitive response to the structure of the image which he is trying to meld.

There is a sentimentality to these drawings, but their frankness can deliver their message with a resounding blow. In a work with the same title as the phrases "I am ashamed to weep... and equally I am ashamed not to weep," MacKay takes a unique position as a male artist. Adding these words over a scene of quiet domesticity, MacKay leaves himself vulnerable to the scrutiny of a public audience. Just as Gurney provides us with an opportunity to question our own connection to the world by exploring her past and present life, MacKay uses the repeated gestures in images and language to look at what they symbolize.

What we are seeing with these two artists is not something unique to Toronto, but a response to large international ideas about artmaking. The traditional method of applying paint onto canvas to make one cohesive image or surface has been all but abandoned by artists such as Gurney and MacKay, while the adoption of images other than their own has become commonplace. No longer is it necessary to use traditional means which carry the connotation of historical paintings. Instead, these artists are bringing to art new ideas that reach beyond paint on canvas, in order to express their own time and place. ♦