

THE ARTS

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IN PERSON

A manager with the spark to rev up Power Plant

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
The Globe and Mail

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY, 44, didn't want to talk about his appointment (announced late last week) as director of Harbourfront Corporation's Power Plant gallery of contemporary art and design, where he succeeds William J. S. Boyle. "It's premature to be talking about it," he said at the start of our conversation. "I can't come up with something that sounds real hip or real sharp, because that's not the situation I am in."

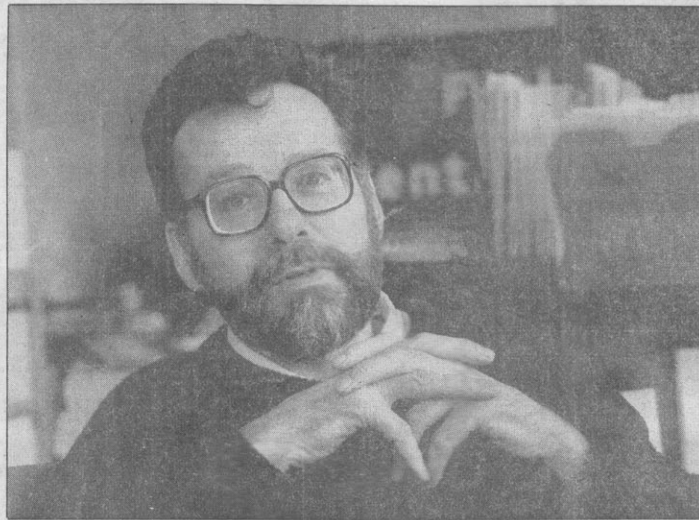
So it happened that Toronto's newest public-gallery director — and the occupant of an art-world hot seat if there ever was one — sat swathed in Turkish towels of organizational jargon for a couple of hours while I shot questions into the muffles, and that's what we called an interview.

One question, for instance, had to do with the consulting job he has recently completed for the Toronto International Festival. His assignment was to come up with what he calls a "model visual-arts program" for an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink cultural festival to be held in the city every couple of years or so. "We examined how it could operate in relation to audience crossover, and how it could attract new money to support art activity in the city. I think it could be very important." Now exactly what all that means, I never did find out.

Another question, this one leading: How does MacKay intend to help sort out the Power Plant's odd mix of y'all-come populist rhetoric (motivated by the tourism promoters in Harbourfront Corporation) and the gallery's steady diet of trendy shows based on last season's ideological fashion in New York?

MacKay's answer: "Well, I haven't seen the demographics, but the Power Plant is a major venue for art in the city, and I've found enough focus for me. Numerically, there are a major number of people who are cultural consumers of Harbourfront and its amenities — that whole mix of people going through. There are also those who pay attention to the critical content of what the Power Plant is all about — collectors, critics, artists. The gallery also attempts to attract school groups through its educational program. The criticism of the Power Plant — I think it's a criticism of success."

There can be little doubt that MacKay has the experience and know-how necessary to run the Power Plant, which is (in one sense) just another version of what he's been running for most of the past 20 years. But throughout his very successful career as director of public art institutions — the gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NASCAD), the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Toronto's



MacKay on working as an artist: 'I spent five years doing my own work . . . It's a bitch. A very solitary activity.'

Art Metropole, among others — MacKay has never been merely a good company man. He doesn't wear his managerial baffle-garb like a person to the manner born. At one point during our interview, he said he was determined to prevent any "watering down of the cutting edge" at the Power Plant. It's the kind of verbal screw-up that makes you like a guy.

But more than an uneasy grasp of the jargon sets MacKay apart from Canada's usual museum manager. MacKay is an affable chameleon who takes his color from the local art scene he happens to be working in — cowboy boots, a beer belly and a shaggy mane in Saskatoon; stylishly sleek top-toe black attire, a trimmed-down body, and a razor-sharp haircut in Toronto.

He identifies with art scenes because he's an artist, and no closet watercolorist either. Ever since graduating from NASCAD in 1967, this native of Prince Edward Island has been exhibiting his

experimental videotapes, extraordinary and haunting audio-tape recordings of his own music and texts, what might be called philosophical objects — a 1982 show featured books encased in wax — and (more recently) chalk pastel and oil drawings on huge sheets of industrial wrapping paper. The impressively made drawings of landscapes and portraits have appeared in Toronto during the last few years, once at Mercer Union and twice at the Grunwald Gallery, MacKay's commercial dealer. A display of portrait drawings, co-organized with Halifax critic and anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault, is currently (through April 2) on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

It was his art that has put the biggest hole (so far) in MacKay's long list of administrative appointments. In 1983, he upped and quit his job as the popular director/curator of the Mendel, announced his intention to work full-time as an artist, then moved from Saskatoon to a tiny vil-

lage near Bern, Switzerland, to do just that. He likes to tell people he went to Switzerland to manage the Oliver North account. The real attractions: his daughter and her Swiss mother, with whom he was to live for the next five years.

Once settled in Europe, MacKay began to draw productively for the first time in years, turning out the large and beautiful landscapes that were shown in the mid-1980s in Switzerland and at several galleries across Canada. But sales did not materialize as fast as the work did, and MacKay soon found himself commuting back to Canada to do various consulting gigs for art schools, museums and arts councils, as a way to keep his art going.

But by early last year, the isolation of Swiss village life had become almost unbearable; and the red ink had gotten so deep he could no longer touch bottom — an experience that gave him personal, painful knowledge about art that most other museum directors only hear about third

hand. "I spent five years doing my own work. It provided a realization of what is involved in making work. It's a bitch. A very solitary activity."

MacKay's death, however, turned out to be a boon for Toronto's Art Metropole, the Conceptual art archive, bookshop and video-distribution centre, which needed the kind of administrative know-how MacKay has. So last spring, he came home to Canada for good, and moved into the director's corner office at the headquarters of Art Metropole — "a very suitable re-entry organization" — on King Street West.

Finding the once-vital resource in disarray, MacKay was faced with the immediate job of shoring up rickety organizational walls. "People had left, there were only two people left on staff. So basically I was in a position of hiring a projects co-ordinator, a distribution manager, an assistant in the bookstore. I have re-introduced exhibitions and events. I've tightened up the organization in terms of personnel, so we cover all the bases — distribution, exhibition, publishing. But there is no fat. It's on track, doing programming that is creating an identity in the community."

Whatever the luck of Art Metropole in re-winning the hearts and minds of Toronto's volatile "community," it appears that MacKay's ministrations have put this unusual and important bookshop-museum back in the business of serving the local artistic tribe. A key part of MacKay's reform is the revival of occasional exhibitions, after a long period during which Art Metropole had done few notable shows. Upcoming events confirmed by him include a retrospective of works on paper by Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay and a survey of Greg Curnue's rubber-stamp books. The archive is continuing to collect video works and multiples, and will go on publishing artists' half-inch videotapes and books.

But when all's said and done, Allan MacKay is an accomplished player whose talents are best used in the Canadian public-gallery system, not the bookstore; and for that reason, his move to the Power Plant makes good sense, both for the gallery and for him. It's not going to be easy administering the high-cultural facade of that farrago of sold-out opportunities and architectural calamities known as Harbourfront. But if MacKay has any doubts about what he's getting into, he's keeping them to himself. "I feel very confident in the curatorial team that is there, and in the funding that has come through from Harbourfront Corporation and the funding agencies. When I came to the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, it required a building. When I came to Art Metropole, it required a lot of fixing up. But the Power Plant is fundamentally very sound — an organization on the upswing."

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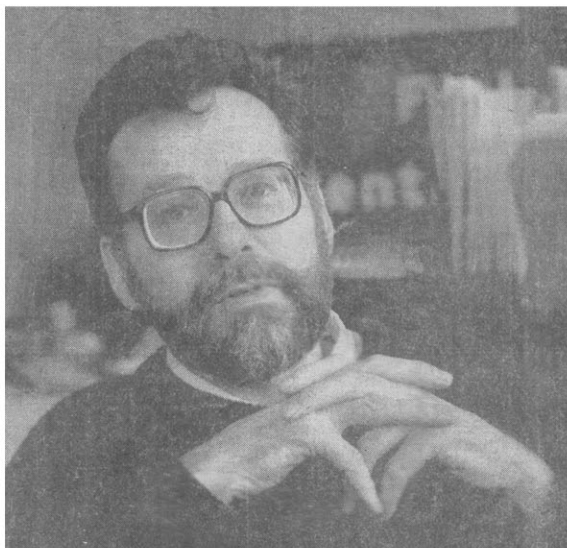
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