SOURCE/DERIVATIONS II
(Lawren Harris)

This installation is the second in a series of creative responses to familiar Canadian landscape icons by the Toronto based painter and draughtsman Allan Harding MacKay. *Source/Derivations* operates as a conceptual framework in which the artist selects a "source" work from an art gallery's permanent collection and then develops a series of "derivations" based on this "source".

Installation view:
Justina M.Barnicke Gallery

Installation details:
Source/Derivations II, 1991
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

The first *Source/Derivations* was mounted at the Ottawa School of Art in March 1989 and involved a number of works in a variety of forms and media inspired by Tom Thomson's 1915 canvas, *Northern River*, in the National Gallery of Canada. Significant to both these projects is the proximity of the source work to the derivations; it is, in fact, an integral part of the installation.

In *Source/Derivations II*, the source image MacKay has chosen is Lawren Harris's Rocky Mountain oil painting of c. 1930, *Isolation Peak*, in the permanent collection of Hart House. *Isolation Peak* has been described as "Harris' quintessential mountain composition and the *summa* of his spiritual ideas relating to life and art. From extant drawings and oil sketches one can follow the artist's path from the particular through the creation of a universal idea." During his five-year. residence in Switzerland (1983-1988), MacKay dedicated his energies to the search for the ideal in a group of paintings entitled *The Perfect Mountain* series.

In the summer of 1991, Allan Harding MacKay retraced Harris's rail journey from Toronto to the Canadian Rockies. In keeping with the practice of the first military topographers and expeditionary artists who depicted these mountains, he located and photographed the site believed to be Harris' inspiration for *Isolation Peak* - a mountain called Isolated Peak in British Columbia's Yoho National Park. It was important for MacKay to witness the raw material that went into Harris's canvas, and, like Harris before him, MacKay returned to his Toronto studio with documentation and memories of Isolated Peak. For MacKay, however, Harris's painting, rather than nature itself, continued to be the touchstone for this present series.

Source/Derivations II combines a number of disparate components - panels, book works, works on paper, and a sculptural element. The panels respond directly to the Harris original in terms of composition and construction, while the books and works on paper refer more broadly to issues and methods of documentation and the context of MacKay's own artistic practice. The sculptural element, *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain*, frames MacKay's interest in projecting the idea of the ideal on this famous, much-mediated (and much-idealized) Canadian landscape image.

Installation view: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Allan Harding MacKay,
Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain, 1991,
paper and wax on wood, 6' high.
Installation view: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Installation view:
McMichael Canadian
Art Collection

Excerpts from the original
Source/Derivations II
were also shown and are
in the collections of
The McMichael Canadian
Collection and the
University of Lethbridge

Installation view:
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

MacKay explores, by aesthetic simulation, the nature of "land-scape" and our perception of "place" as a product of both layering and erasure, of excavation and screening, of accretion and attrition, of abstraction and extraction. Paraffin wax, Damar varnish and skeins of draughtsman's tracing paper incised and folded back, simultaneously reveal and conceal what lies beneath. The intervening/semi-translucent/semi-opaque layers act as metaphors for the notion of the Sublime and for the various media (including well-known paintings and reproductions thereof) through which we perceive what we take to be external reality. The viewing device, which permits the observer alternately to narrow and expand, to frame and to focus his or her vision, serves as a reminder that it is now virtually impossible to see the outside world except through the eyes of those who have come before. While Harris sought to achieve spiritual transcendence through the materiality of oil paint and the physicality of painting, MacKay seems to stress the materiality of the spiritual in the way that he coats and sculpts with paper and wax the derivations from *Isolation Peak*.

The question remains: is the present series of works a late 20th century continuance of the 19th century Romantic tradition of which Harris, though a modernist, was a part by virtue of his apparent identification of art with nature and of nature with art? Or does it represent, conversely, a rejection of the creed of the painter as "seer" and communer with the natural world and the "beyond?" Perhaps MacKay is staking out a third position: that of the postmodernist artist as an intermediary or bridge between past and present, culture and nature, the real and the ideal.

Robert Stacey

References:
Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes*, 1906-1930

as the most shadowy and suggestive of ciphers. The suggestion of the dark side of the psyche and the myriad emotional nuances all point towards the *tremendum* as thematic content of Wood's work.

The drawing provides the photography with a complementary voice and vice versa. Each medium completes and phenomenally empowers the other. Furthermore, the photography may be said to anchor in the Real (however indeterminate the reality in question may be) the morphology of form and open symbology of the drawings, at once deepening their formal power and heightening their subjective feeling-value.

Wood's photo-drawings register a primary confrontation with a mysterious other. However, the triumph of interpretation here lies in recognizing the other as being none other than the self, even if it is a self besieged by the shadow.

Finally then, these photo-drawings seem to be less about the process of striving after a unified personality than an attempt to articulate the travails of a continually decentered selfhood. We are taught that the ego develops through making the hard choices that are necessary to achieve reconciliation. Yet that which has been historically suppressed or sacrificed in the name of unity surfaces in these works, in their fey collocations of form and haunting coalescences of affect. It would in no way strain the metaphoric reach of this work to argue that it is an effective mirror for our own internalized Narcissus, for the longer I spend peering into the watery silence of these ink/photo drawings, the more I recognize the emerging shadow – the dark side.

These compelling works are vertical labyrinths in which I discover a Minotaur who is my own monstrous double.

James D. Campbell

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, TORONTO

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY
SourceDerivations II (1991)
Installation view

What are we seeing? How can we look at this? These are not unusual questions for the viewer of an exhibition to pose. What is unusual in the case of the recent installation, *SourceDerivations II* by Allan Harding MacKay is that the artist is asking them. And thus, an intimate bond is created between artist and viewer, which is a strange, even disconcerting experience in our culture.

For surely western society is characterized by confrontation and opposition. Consider our legal system, our parliamentary government, culture vs. nature, male vs. female, logic vs. intuition, reason vs. faith, and so on. We are the *au contraire* society lampooned in Carroll's Tweedledee and Tweedledum. We agree to argue; we argue even when we agree.

Confrontation and argument function through polarization and exaggeration. Resolution comes through winning. The positions presented in an argument are based on closure – that is, the opponents attempt to create coherent and unassailable positions. This structure has been as much present in art as elsewhere. It is merely somewhat more subtly established. Artwork is often designed to challenge – to confront the viewer with the truth; to mystify, confuse or disorient; or to overwhelm through sheer monumentality – in other words, to take an unassailable position vis à vis the viewer. The viewer, at least as critic, has retreated to unassailable theory.

Urged on by the elitist posturing of theosophy, Lawren Harris cultivated the most unassailable of all positions – spiritual symbolism. Closure in message: who can challenge arcane spiritual truth discovered through the illumination of devotees? Closure in form: who can challenge the mathematical perfection of geometric form? Harris created disciples or enemies. More recently, he has been ignored.

As I see it, MacKay has refused to be disciple, enemy or indifferent. He has said, in effect, I want a conversation with this artist who has been central to the myths of Canadian identity but I reject confrontation and argument as a means of discourse. To have this conversation, Lawren Harris's work had to be opened up; his closure of meaning and form had to be renegotiated rather than rejected or opposed. As it turns out, MacKay is one of the great visual conversationalists.

I'll begin at the beginning. In front of Harris's painting, *Isolation Peak* (c.1930), which is in the permanent collection at Hart House, MacKay has placed what he calls a viewing device. It is an ingenious device: a circle with an isosceles triangle cut out of it, placed on a stand. The triangular hole is reinforced and made less rigid and assertive by pieces of translucent paper punctured by irregular triangular cut-outs. This viewing device is the key to the installation. Through it, the viewer can see Isolation Peak simply as a triangle. Whereas Lawren Harris's mountain as triangle is full; MacKay's viewing triangle is empty. Harris's is to look at; MacKay's is to look through. And yet, not entirely to look through. The viewing device also defines, simplifies and, in a sense, summarizes. It is not oppositional. By moving, the viewer can view any area of the painting through the triangle. The roughly cut translucent paper underplays the geometry and clarity of the image. The triangle – that most inflexible of forms and most ancient of patriarchal symbols – becomes available to shifts in form and meaning. MacKay opens up the painting, freeing it from its magisterial and authoritarian intent.

ALLAN HARDING MACKAY
Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain (1991)
Pastel, wax & paper on wood

After this initial viewing, the rest of the exhibition is a long conversation in which *Isolation Peak* is the focus but is no longer a dogmatic assertion. It has had to give up its aloof authority and yield to examination.

Across the room from the painting with its viewing device are seven large paintings/drawings of *Isolation Peak*, in which MacKay frees the image from the painting. The "masterwork" (unique, final, authoritative) has been replicated seven times in large for-mat. The drawing lines are re-established and the freedom of the initial sketch is recovered. The image has been appropriated, not in order to give it new meaning or contextualize it, but to make it humanly accessible. The mystique of the finished work and the restrictiveness of one spiritual meaning are both set aside so that conversation can flow.

Once the axis of communication has been established, the conversation can begin. The non-linear, tangental nature of conversation, its alternating abruptness and fluidity, its personal twists and turns and, most of all, its openness to surprise and discovery are regularly underestimated in our quest for linear, efficient discourse. MacKay allows the non-linear, visual conversation with *Isolation Peak* to wend its way through typical categories of informed dialogue that we use to arrive at knowledge. And, it is a conversation full of surprises and excitements.

On tables, walls and shelves, MacKay lays out partially hidden, partially revealed writings and copies, photographs and diagrams of *Isolation Peak*. Some are curatorial commentary (*A Waxed Facsimile of the Curatorial File Relating to Lawren Harris's Isolation Peak*), some are archival references and some are visual representations (21 works on paper, seven bookworks). All of them have the gently probing, questioning, but never confrontational characteristics of good, intense conversation. The installation is a series of insights, allusions and illuminations. But mostly it is an opening gambit for a long and endless conversation we have to have with our own past.

Terrence Heath

COLETTE WHITEN

The Power Plant, TORONTO

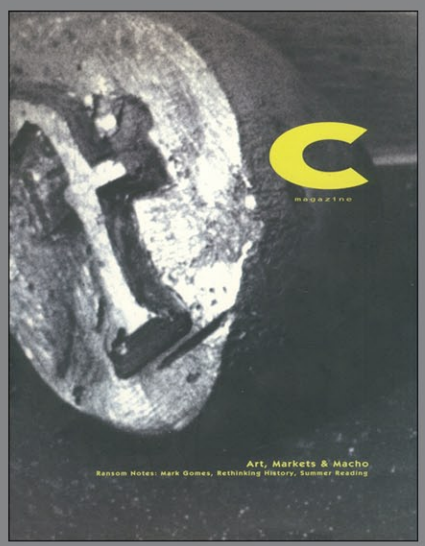
COLETTE WHITEN
New Needlework (1991)
Installation view

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan wrote: ...print technology created the public. Electric technology created the mass. The public consists of separate individuals walking around with separate, fixed points of view. The new technology demands that we abandon the luxury of this posture, this fragmentary outlook.

As dystopian and dated as this statement may appear today, it resonates with truth. Media images do infiltrate every aspect of our lives, collectively informing or misinforming our views on local, national and international events. Colette Whiten's most recent series of needleworks explores our image-saturated environment through an intelligent appropriation of news-wire images rendered delicately in needlepoint.

Whiten's source material has undoubtedly been seen by many of us on the front pages of the daily papers – glanced at in conjunction with the headlines and discarded at the end of the day. Her images are familiar, but unlike Whiten's previous series of needleworks of immediately recognizable figures such as Mulroney, North and Gorbachev, the figures in these images are unidentified women. We seek identification, but the accompanying titles offer us none: *Overcoming Difference, Faces of Despair, Cooling Relations, Foreigners Held in Baghdad U.S. Says, Palestinians Remembered.* Whiten strategically probes the role of women in the media through the exclusion of men and the anonymity of the women in her selection of images.

News-wire images are at odds with



ALLAN HARDING MACKAY

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery,
Hart House, Toronto

Installation view:
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Installation view:: Justine M. Barnicke Gallery

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Terrence Heath

Installation view:
*Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain, {*1991)
Pastel, wax & paper on wood.
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Installation details:
Source/Derivations II (1991),
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Installation view: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Terrence Heath

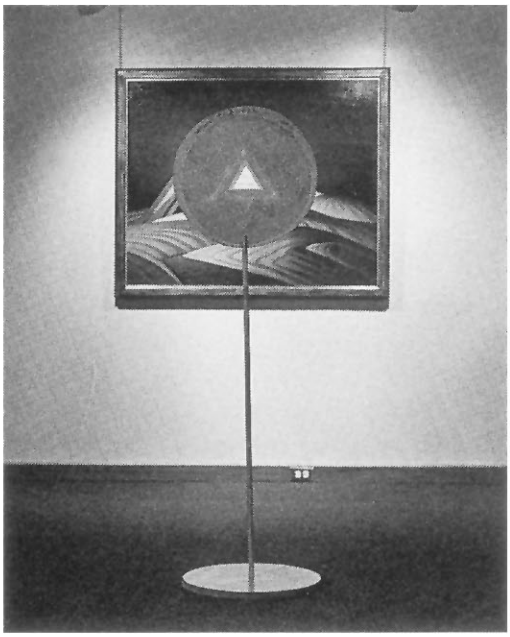
REVIEWS

ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Allan Harding MacKay situated his recent installation, *Source/Derivations II*, 1992, within the historical framework of Canadian painting, examining the relationship between depicted nature and real experience. MacKay has based 35 variations on one primary source, a widely reproduced painting by Lawren Harris, created around 1930. This exercise attempts to sever ties with the landscape painting tradition, presenting instead a facsimile of nature for our investigation.

MacKay's's enterprise begins with *Isolation Peak*, one of Harris' most popular works, a classic scene of a single mountain peak selected from the gallery collection. American culture has enshrined the Hudson River School; the Canadian equivalent is the Group of Seven, to which Harris belonged. Harris' is a utopian vision that arranges space hierarchically, placing the mountaintop at the apex of the composition. MacKay has capitalized on Harris' clichéd notions of idealized beauty-singular, noble, and majestic-using these as the starting point for his investigation.



Allan Harding MacKay, Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain, 1991, paper and wax on wood, 6' high.

The original Harris painting is hung in a prominent position within the installation; in front of it is placed the "*Viewing Device for the Perfect Mountain*," a contraption that secures a specific view of the peak through its modest-size triangular hole. Once established, this triangle acts as a reference point throughout the installation; the symbol represents a mountain, while simultaneously serving as a pure abstract form.

In addition to the Harris painting and the "Viewing Device," the installation includes seven near-scale painted panels that mimic the stages of painterly development in the Harris canvas: 21 artist's "sketches" made with tracing paper, wax, and photocopies of the images in the original painting; seven heavily waxed book-works originating from museum catalogues; and a wax facsimile of the museum's curatorial file on the original painting. As part of his conceptual project, MacKay traveled to the Rocky Mountains in search of Harris' Isolation Peak. Although he was never able to find the exact prototype, the documentation that he returned with suggests the mediation between artist and nature.

Here MacKay is treating nature as a construct, dissecting its parts through the many layers of paraffin, wax, and varnish that cover the tracing paper of his studies. Just as the early topographers fabricated an understanding of nature through measurements and mathematical formulas, M4cKay is processing Harris' depiction of Isolation Peak-cutting and folding back the same triangular shape used in the "Viewing Device"-to reveal color as well as black and white photocopies of the mountain.

MacKay acknowledges that, for Canadians, the experience of their country's idealized wilderness is necessarily mediated. Here he reinvents the landscape tradition, examining the mystique of nature and forming a bridge between our cultural past and present environmental realities Though an authentic experience of nature is unretrievable, we are able to rearrange our detached experiences of it in whatever form we wish.

Linda Genereux

Installation view: Justina M.Barnicke Gallery

FAMILIAR LAND

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 1992 VARSITY REVIEW

BY ROXANNE CHEE

Source/Derivations II
by Allan Harding Mackay
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Familiar land

Painting by Mackay

Source/Derivations II
by Allan Harding Mackay
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

BY ROXANNE CHEE

Stepping into the room, your eyes meet with a row of seven unlike panels of a familiar landscape image, Group of Seven's Lawren Harris *Isolation Peak* (c. 1930. The original (part of the Hart House Permanent Collection) hangs on the opposite wall, well-lit in all altogether dimlit space.

Arranged along the remaining walls is a series of smaller framed works on paper whose white dominated interiors emphasize the ever-present peaks. Nearby, on a wooden table rests books works. A structure titled *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain* stands before the original canvas, lending a sculptural component to the exhibition.

What becomes obvious after some perusal is that these relative interpretations of a provocative Canadian landscape image represent more than studies on a familiar theme. Rather, they constitute exploration into the meaning of place and the ideal, particularly as it is affected and changed by time, in history and in the Canadian imagination.

The artist responsible for this mixed-media installation, *Source/Derivations II* on view at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is Allan Harding MacKay, a Prince Edward Island born artist and gallery director. MacKay takes a popular landscape icon and develops a series of "derivations" based on the "source." In this sense, the painting itself becomes MacKay's motivation rather than nature which was Harris' inspiration.

Perhaps he understands the past as a living thing, carried within all of us that compelled MacKay to retrace Harris' train journey from Toronto to the Rockies. Assuming the "railway-eye-view" of the times, MacKay travels back to the earliest moment of creation. There at Jasper National Park, he photographed the site and witnessed the raw materials that went into Harris' canvas, altogether recovering, a mind searching for connections and meaning in his environment, a mind engaged in composing. Like Harris, MacKay too returns to his Toronto studio to synthesize his findings and develop his interpretations of the landscape.

The results speak for themselves. The panels, similar in construction and composition to the original but finished in palettes of greens and yellows, blues, purple-blacks, and russets are the immediate response to the "source" work. After some deliberation and mental comparison, what becomes apparent is that Harris'

unique vision of the Canadian landscape rather than MacKay's "derivations" feels right in every sense, that somehow everything about Isolation Peak was meant to be exactly as it is -the composition, the cool blue-white palette, the oil medium, the pronounced contours, the simple beauty. The *Viewing Device For a Perfect Mountain* stands before the original. allowing the watcher to frame and examine each aspect of this "perfect mountain."

MacKay's point is well-taken: Changing any element of the mythic image not only makes for a new image, but challenges the significance of the existing one. By distorting the ideal, the heroic and mythic dimensions we associate with the form becomes subdued in the imagination, and eventually in our art. Imagine the implications for Canadian art had the ideal peak been different.

In the book works and works on paper, the artist deals broadly with the issues and methods of documentation, how they affect our perception of place and the landscape. Hence, the documentary quality pervading the show. Essentially, the book works are magazines or art publications about *Isolation Peak*. Like a shroud, paraffin wax encases the pages, blanketing the text, save for select words like "Isolation Peak represents" and the photographic reproduction of the peak itself. Even so, the image is further disfigured by wax splashes, etchings, cut-outs, slashes. MacKay's treatment of books demonstrate the futility of words, how, with time, words become “waxed over”, fade and fail to carry meaning. But, the wordless image, despite deformation, continues to loom large in the geography of the land and the imagination, always pushing through to give meaning to that rare thing known as Canadian identity.

The works on paper undergo a similar treatment: obscured behind sheets of semi-opaque semi-transparent draughtsman tracing paper, the mountain is revealed as tracings in outline or through incisions and rips, folded back and weighted with wax. Despite its disjointed, even mutilated shape, the form is unmistakably *Isolation Peak*. Although there is much attempt at concealing and obscuring, simultaneously, there is also an effort to erect, excavate, even combust the image through the layers of paraffin and paper. This paradoxical treatment of in idealized Canadian image acts as metaphor for out schizophrenic Canadian consciousness, where there is at once a need to embrace nature and the land while outrightly rejecting it. Regardless, the images of the Canadian landscape forged by Harris and the Group of Seven lingers, remaining an essential part of the collected identity.

From *Source/Derivations II*, one gets the impression of the artist coming to terms with the past and with the mythic images that dominate and define what is Canadian. By recreating those images, in essence, MacKay is owning them and making them real to himself, and hopefully, to us.

TAKING a PEEP at a PERFECT ICON

C6 THE ARTS The Globe and Mail, Friday, January 10, 1992

Taking a peep at a perfect icon

ART ABOUT

KATE TAYLOR

BY KATE TAYLOR

Allan MacKay is better known in Toronto as a gallery director (of the Power Plant, at Harbourfront) than as an artist and - to judge from a current show - even when the artist takes the upper hand, academic and curatorial issues remain central to him.

For his show that opened this week at the Justina Barnicke Gallery in the University of Toronto's Hart House, MacKay takes as his starting point Lawren Harris's famous *Isolation Peak* and builds around it an installation that comments on the power of that triangular icon in the Canadian consciousness. The installation - *SourcelDerivations II* - represents the second in a series: MacKay first used this approach at the Ottawa School of Art with Tom Thomson's *Northern River* as his inspiration.

The first element of this new installation is the original painting itself - it is part of the Hart House collection hanging on the first wall as you enter the gallery. MacKay has created a viewer - "*Viewing Device for Perfect Mountain*" - through which we can peer, highlighting the perfect triangular form of *Isolation Peak* by framing it with a triangular peep hole.

Across from the original sits a series of copies of the painting in various stages of completion, various colours and various media. And around the room are displayed multiple smaller works in which photographic images of the painting or of catalogues about the painting are hidden underneath layers of wax or tracing paper. These are the most technically engaging works in the show, where the image of the mountain occasionally peeps forth from a triangular hole gouged through thick layers of paper from under a flimsy triangular flap.

At some levels the installation is a curatorial exercise, for its first impact on most viewers will be to make them re-examine a famous and familiar historical work. By literally covering *Isolation Peak* in layers of wax and paper, MacKay forces us to peel back the layers that cover the image of the famous mountain in our mind's eye.

But at a more challenging level, the installation is not just about *Isolation Peak*, but also about the relationship between artist and subject, and the toll history takes on imagery. Isolation Peak was an idealized image of the perfect mountain - a single icy pyramid reaching toward the heavens from an undulating base of foothills - inspired by Isolated Peak in British Columbia's Yoho National Park. MacKay (who visited the site, retracing Harris's journey to the Rockies) takes this process of distancing the art from the original one step further, revealing in his installation how imagery is burdened with the heavy weight of repeated reproduction.