

SOURCE/DERIVATIONS III

(Ron Benner)



Allan Harding MacKay seems more interested in the good and the true than the beautiful. Or, better, he takes the art process only far enough to serve the revelation of the good and the true. Many artists have self-consciously announced their re-engagement with the "real" world as a heralding of "committed" art, "engaged" art, art of the people. MacKay seems hardly to notice that he is making art. His attention is focused on the human reality he has to contend with. This focus of attention is nowhere more obvious than in his most recent visual "conversation" with the work of another artist.

Source/Derivations III is the third in a series of visual responses to other, major art works. Only this time there is a difference in approach, perhaps even a complete reversal of intention. In his earlier derivations, from Tom Thomson's *Northern River* (1989) and Lawren Harris's *Isolation Peak* (1992), his central concern was how these historic works could be looked at with contemporary eyes. He opened up layered meanings and symbols, explored possible avenues of approach, tabulated references and, in the case of Lawren Harris's *Isolation Peak*, he even built a viewing device for looking at the work. I had the impression when I saw these exhibitions that MacKay was trying to assist me in understanding the works or, at least, in looking at them. In *Source/Derivations III* I have the feeling he is himself trying to understand and I, viewer that I may be, am not the recipient of his discoveries, but an observer of his searching.

Said another way, MacKay seems in *Source/Derivations III* to be much more focused on the Source than in the previous works in the series, where it was the Derivations that remained central to the exhibitions. In *Source/Derivations III* the six large photo-based paintings of Ron Benner are never left for a moment. It seems as if every choice of MacKay's, from materials to colour to process, has a direct contact with the original. He has not stepped back (as he did, I think, in the Lawren Harris exhibition) and mused over the work. His response is direct, sometimes almost a structural repetition of Benner's *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*, sometimes left open-ended, as if he could go no further in approaching the substance of the work.

Installation views: Art Gallery of Windsor



Installation detail:
Art Gallery of Windsor

And the image of Benner is also everywhere present. MacKay has photographed Benner, drawn a portrait from the photograph, blown up both photo and drawing, photocopied them, cut up the photo of the drawing to focus in on the face that had experienced the tragedy from which the six progressively blackened panels came. The clear acetate photocopies of the portrait have been bent and superimposed over photocopies of the paintings which can be seen behind the transparent black acetate faces. Benner's friend is dead; the event is past; the blame is who knows where; the world goes on.

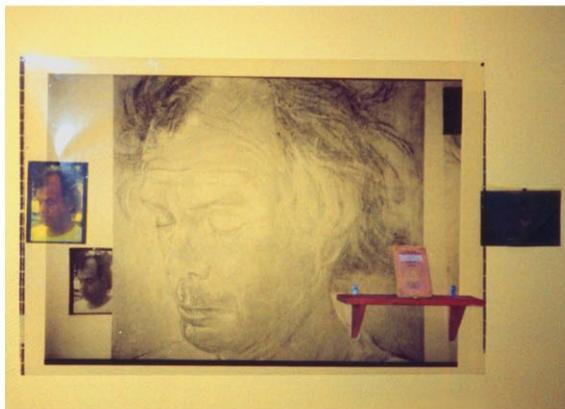
And, yet, MacKay is not content to look at the work; he seems obsessed with the human act of this art. "I, too, am an artist; I, too, have loss that I hold in me; I, too, give physical shape to my sorrows," he seems to be saying. But, in the end, he can only stand aside and say: "Sorrow, Testimony, Anger, Interrogation." And two of these words, even, are not his, but ones he found in the text of an earlier catalogue essay, referring to *As dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid*, by Matthew Teitelbaum: "testimony" and "interrogation." These words, hidden originally in the regular, visually concealing lines of printed text and now released from their typographic prison into the light of this gallery of sorrow, testimony, anger and interrogation.

Terrence Heath



Installation detail and views: Art Gallery of Windsor





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While building on the approach established in other *Source/Derivations* the artist intended in *Source/Derivations III* to consider aspects of the AGW collection that reflected on the historical, and more specifically post-industrial, context of Windsor. For this project, MacKay selected "As dark as the grave wherin my friend is laid" (1975/76), a mixed-media work by the London, Ontario artist Ron Benner. MacKay's investigation represented a departure from his methodology in that, in *Source Derivations III*, he dealt with the work of a living artist. For MacKay, this project represented not only an exploration of an aspect of the AGW's collection, but (perhaps more significantly) an opportunity for respectful negotiation and dialogue with the artist Ron Benner. The work selected by MacKay was of deep personal significance to Benner, in that it was made to honour the memory of two fellow railway workers who had been killed in a derailment near Windsor.

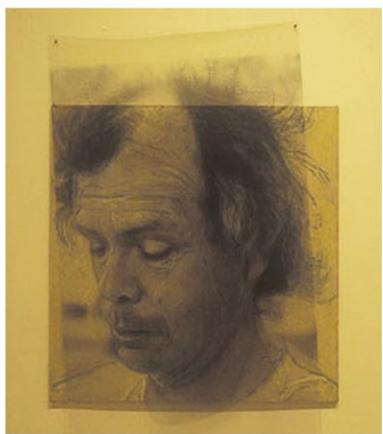
Source/Derivations III served to initiate different dialogues between the artist and the gallery (representing institutional and cultural history), the artist and community, and the artist (MacKay) and the artist (Benner) - in a critical yet constructive manner. In this work, MacKay fused his interest in the process of deconstructing histories, as embodied in visual images, with his interest in a constructed identity as seen through the genre of portraiture. In each case, we learn that representations and meaning are provisional, elusive, allusive and fleeting, never fixed, always predicated on history and experience, time and memory.



Installation detail and view: Art Gallery of Windsor



MacKay's methodology involves a form of cultural archaeology and filtering which positions the artist as an aesthetic facilitator or bridge between past and present, culture and nature, the real and the mythological. By focusing on aspects of the AGW collection, the project not only posed a re-interpretation of a work(s) in the collection, but in turn reflected on the significant historical role as exhibitor and interpreter of its holdings played by the gallery (and by other collecting institutions). This vital, interactive role provides a greater appreciation for locale, place, region and the construction of identity, whether it be personal or for a community.



Installation detail and views: Art Gallery of Windsor

Vincent J. Varga

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ALLAN HARDING MacKAY

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