

Allan Harding MacKay Memorial Project

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Allan HARDING MacKAY: Memorial Project

Virginia EICHHORN

*There has never been
a good war or a bad peace.*
—Benjamin FRANKLIN

Canadians have never been entirely comfortable with the role of the armed forces. Our country's motto is "Peace, Order and Good Government"—not the kind of cry that people carry with them into battle the way they would something like "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" or "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." In fact, in one of the best known advertising campaigns in recent time—Joe Canadian's "Rant"—Canadians are distinguished as people who believe in peacekeeping, not policing. Yet when the time has come Canadians have distinguished themselves on battlefields, often paying the ultimate sacrifice, whether on the battlefields of Passchendaele in World War I, in Iraq in 2005 or any of the other times when diplomacy has given way to the terrors and horror of war. And inevitably the people back home have erected memorials in honour of the soldiers who fought and who fell, in the name of Canada. For the most part these memorials have been quite traditional, following a certain format that usually includes statues of young men in the appropriate garb of the time, often either with injured comrades and guided by angels or figures representing metaphoric qualities such as courage and righteousness. They are easily read and understood and have, for the most part, remained unchanged for centuries.

Allan Harding MacKay recently designed the newest "war" memorial for the City of Toronto. It was unveiled on September 17th, 2006, the 100th anniversary of the 1st day of the legislature. The unveiling was a momentous celebration involving the largest military parade that the city had seen in generations. Unlike many of the war memorials that are celebrations of the "glory of the ultimate sacrifice" this memorial was not intended to celebrate war, but rather to acknowledge those who served in the Canadian Armed Forces from the beginning of Confederation to present day Afghanistan.

Allan Harding MacKay is one of Canada's best known and most accomplished and innovative contemporary artists. As well as having a prestigious career as an arts administrator (including Director of the Power Plant, the

Mendel Art Gallery, Southern Alberta Art Gallery and current Curatorial Consultant at the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery.) MacKay has had a long and successful career as a practicing artist and served twice as Canada's Official War Artist—making him an incredibly appropriate choice for such a commission.

In 1993 MacKay was contracted as an artist by the Canadian Department of National Defense to document artistically the Canadian peacekeeping activities in Somalia. The work which MacKay created as a result of that experience became known as the *Somalia Yellow Series* and consists of award winning videos, drawings, paintings, collages and prints which have been exhibited in and acquired by prestigious museums such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian War Museum and the University of Lethbridge. Additional projects from this series include a touring theatre collaboration with the One Yellow Rabbit Performance ensemble that staged *Somalia Yellow* in Calgary, Prague and Glasgow in 2002. And in 1996 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired a documentary (directed by Richard Wright) on MacKay's Somalia experience titled *Changing Perspectives*. In July 2002 MacKay was invited to participate in a pilot project of the Canadian Forces Artist Programme as a war artist with Operation Apollo in Afghanistan. It is from these experiences that he drew upon, and that inspired him, in the creation of the memorial.

The memorial itself is a long black granite wall, which has been sensitively integrated within the landscape of the Ontario Legislature. The wall contains pictures, images of war that MacKay found within the collections of the War Museum, Glenbow Museum and the National Archives. He literally sorted through thousands of them before making his final selection. The images were engraved onto the granite. They show battle scenes and marches but also include non-typical imagery such as a solitary

soldier who holds a small child in his arms as they both look somberly through a window. In short, it is not only a comprehensive historic overview of wars in which Canadians have been involved with, but also a comprehensive overview of the minutiae and day-to-day experiences that these soldiers lived through. The images chosen also allow for a sense of universality, of representing the experiences of many, of personalizing the connection between viewer and the "unknown" soldier.

The ends of the structure are covered in bronze onto which are engraved the supporting documentary texts, acknowledgements and lists of the conflicts in which Canadians were involved thus providing a framing device for the imagery. On the centre of the monument is another bronze insert, this includes a poetic text created by author Jane Urquhart specifically for this work.

Directly behind this bronze text panel stands a centuries old red maple tree. Within the concrete path on front of the monument hundreds of maple leaves have been embossed, appearing almost as though they had fallen from the tree. In choosing this imagery MacKay wanted to acknowledge and symbolize the sacrifices that had been made by the soldiers of times past as well as those that continue to this very day.

Depending on the weather and

the time of day, the monument and its imagery seem to change. There is a fluidity almost, a life or energy to it that inspires viewers to connect with it directly. In fact it is not uncommon to see people reaching out to touch it, to stroke an image or make physical contact with it in some way. It is as if by doing so the division between past and present dissolves. MacKay, and the team who helped to realize this memorial, has made the past come alive. No longer are they merely names and dates and places, these soldiers have become "real" and we, those fortunate enough not to be living in a place of war, connect with them.

As the wars continue in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in other places around the world, we know that more lives will be lost as a result, more families destroyed, more homes and homelands decimated. We know this as surely and as inevitably as the fact that more leaves will fall from the large red maple tree that stands guard behind this monument. ←

Allan Harding MacKay,
War memorial, Toronto
September 17th, 2006

Virginia EICHHORN is curator at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery in Waterloo. She sits on the board of Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts. She lives in Kitchener, ON with her husband and three sons, who she hopes never have to go to war.



Allan HARDING MacKAY, *War memorial*, 2006. Photo: courtesy of the artist.