

Landon

Mackenzie

Pentamentalist: The Painted Underworld of Landon Mackenzie,

by Robin Laurence, article in *Border Crossings*, summer, 1996

LANDON MACKENZIE'S VANCOUVER STUDIO IS A BRIGHT, WHITE, WAREHOUSE SPACE, FILLED WITH THE FAMILIAR JUMBLE OF HER CALLING: PAINT BRUSHES AND PIGMENTS, GESSO AND ACRYLIC MEDIUM, JARS AND SQUEEZE BOTTLES STRETCHERS AND CANVAS, TABLES AND STEP STOOLS A SINGLE, ANACHRONISTIC EASEL. ANACHRONISTIC BECAUSE MACKENZIE PAINTS LARGE AND WORKS ON THE FLOOR. SHE WALKS RIGHT ONTO HER SEVEN-AND-A-HALF BY TEN FOOT CANVASES, FORCING A PHYSICAL ENCOUNTER LITERALLY ENGAGING A NOTION OF THE BODY.

We're looking at her most recent painting, a darkly luminous canvas with multiple strands of text-historic and contemporary, fact and fiction-handwritten across its surface, then flooded with layers of transparent and obliterating colour, and over these layers of colour, more colour, grids and dots and dashes, and pools of deepest darkness. I ask the painting's name and Mackenzie replies Angel of Assiniboia, cautions that this is a working title, not yet finalized, discusses another painting title she likes, talks about her fascination with old maps, enthuses over an historic American atlas recently encountered, says her mind is "a bit like a sieve," then adds the work's subtitle, "Still the Restless Whispers Never Leave Me". Earlier works in the same series bear titles like "The Valley of Hidden Secrets... She told me not to worry because we can only hold seven things in our short term memory and if I loved a Cowboy.../Leaving her fingerprints all over everything she does." There's starting to be a shape to the narrative that even the titles form, "Mackenzie says with a laugh. The titles "interface" with the densely written text that underlies all her new work.

As we discuss the new painting, sifting through its histories and surfaces, a package arrives by courier. Mackenzie opens it and out pore articles and reviews of her show "Saskatchewan Paintings," recently opened at Espace 502 in Montreal. The show, which originated at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver and is touring to the Dunlop in Regina, has had a rapturous reception in the Montreal press, although it's also been the occasion for the voicing of some regional biases. Mackenzie reads out loud a review in *Voir*, a piece that speaks of her sensational debut as a neo-figurative painter in Montreal in 1981-the year she won first prize in that city's painting biennale and launched her much acclaimed and much collected "Lost River" series - then goes on to lament her disappearance from critical view after 1983.

Puis, le silence," Mackenzie reads, and sighs. It's as if she'd been gagged and kidnapped to some distant, non-art-making land, when, in fact, she quite voluntarily moved to Toronto, to Edmonton, and in 1986, to Vancouver. As her CV documents, Mackenzie continued to paint and exhibit throughout the '80s and '90s. She continued to be reviewed, too, although perhaps not in Montreal. Despite her sustained activity, it is only recently that Mackenzie has had what she calls "a second window" in her painting career - another shot at the critical and public success of her earlier work.

Among the many themes of place and history, voice and geography, myth-making, map-making and imagination that inform her new paintings, is the sense of a "flâneuse" on a solitary journey.

Journey is an appropriate metaphor for Mackenzie's creative practice, her commitment to bringing her art forward through the minefields of critical theory and curatorial fashion, through the prescriptions against painting laid down by Conceptualism and Feminism. Not that the journey looked quite so fraught with warnings when Mackenzie first

set out. "I came from a family where women did paint," She says. "I had those role models." Her great-grandmother was a "society portrait painter" and her grandmother, Alice Sawtelle Mackenzie, pursued a successful career as a painter, designer and watercolourist. On the other side of the gender fence, her uncle, Hugh Mackenzie, was and is a realist painter, whose second career as a respected art teacher also suggested a possible path for Landon. (She has taught for 16 years, with stints of varying lengths at Concordia University, the University of Alberta, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.)

Although neither of her parents is an artist, both were active in the cultural life of Toronto, where Mackenzie grew up. The writers, artists and thinkers who visited the house were "trying to define Canadian national identity, politically and culturally." Mackenzie recalls. Her family had a particular involvement with Painters Eleven-Harold Town was a close friend of her mother's and the artists associated with the Isaac! Gallery. The effect was manifold: curling-edge art was fully integrated into Mackenzie's upbringing and sensibility; notions of Canadian-ness were actively discussed; and marriage, motherhood and social conformity were never seen as ultimate goals. Both parents offered this message," Mackenzie says, "You can do whatever you want."

An important revelation about "whatever" might have occurred when Mackenzie visited Town's Toronto studio while still a teenager. (The experience was to be replayed later, in Irene Wittome's Montreal studio.) "I went into Harold's studio and I just thought, I want this!" It wasn't the mess of paint and beer cans, or the "behavioral license that the role of the artist seemed to offer. "It was, instead, the idea of "a room of one's own," a place where she could fully realize the images and impulses bounding round her psyche. She formulated a plan to skip grade 13 and attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. "My work has always dealt with these imaginary ideas of place," Mackenzie says. At the time, she was "completely enthralled with the idea of Halifax." She had also been impressed by her uncle's positive experience, producing a print at the NSCAD press. "He'd come back very excited about the school," she remembers. In 1972 when Landon Mackenzie arrived at NSCAD, She was 17 years old, all but penniless, and quite unprepared to learn that painting was not on at this hotbed of conceptualism. "The message was," she says, "We don't paint." Addressing her penniless condition, Mackenzie made signs for a cigar store, slung beer at the student pub and worked as a life model at the college. ("How," she asks, "does the girl who is making her living going through art school as a nude life model on a Tuesday get taken seriously in the class on Wednesday when she's supposed to be the agent of art?") Addressing her painting-less condition, Mackenzie drew intensively, made an animated film, and "backed into" printmaking. "The work that I got recognition for at NSCAD, which allowed me to go to graduate school, was etching." Because she couldn't afford to buy new metal plates for each assignment, she used the same plate over and over, scratching out the previous image, but leaving behind some favourite bit of it, some trace of her earlier activity. "The plate started to take on a kind of pictorial base that began to get really interesting," Mackenzie recalls. She logged long hours in the printshop, often labouring through the night, and both her working habits and the build-up of images in her prints accorded with the "task-oriented" and "event-based" idea of art that prevailed at the College. "What I picked up there was a very strong ethic around ritual and methodology," she says. "So much of what was going on at NSCAD had to do with layering..., a daily performance where time was factored in and where the personal was implied, without necessarily being explored."

In March 1976, after her accelerated graduation, Mackenzie went off to the Yukon, with the intention of getting to the high Arctic. Her project was one of place: she was fascinated by the role of the North in the Canadian "imaginary," and would make a number of subsequent trips to the Yukon to pursue the experience of the myth-enhanced-and human-damaged-northern landscape. "It was in the Yukon that I first became aware of environmental issues," Mackenzie said in a 1987 interview in *Now* magazine. "I can't separate landscape from its use." While there, she worked as a sign painter for the Highways Department (converting miles to kilometres"), took river expeditions into the wilderness-and refused to sketch in the landscape. "I hate sketching," she says. "I don't want to work outdoors. I've always made landscapes from looking into imaginative space." The work she initiated there was an artist's book, titled "Girl Eaten by Bear, Silver Earring Found as Evidence, which combined characteristic elements of landscape, female narration, humour and "sexual innuendo." An important realization of that six-month northern sojourn, however, was that teaching would probably be the key to earning a living as an artist, and to teach she would need to be qualified. Seeking "access to a free printing press," Mackenzie returned south in the fall of 1976, to Montreal, and enrolled as a graduate student at Concordia University.

A big motivation in choosing Concordia was to Study with Irene Whittome who, with Guido Molinari, ran the graduate program. Her teachers at NSCAD had all been men and Mackenzie wanted to know what it would be like to work with a woman. "I was looking for clues about art practice," she says. Settling on Whittome as a mentor and role model was a stroke of luck: at the same time, Mackenzie enrolled in the MFA program, she was ignorant

of "how important Irene's work was, and of what an incredible teacher she could be." She soon became aware that "the energy" at Concordia is really about painting, but Mackenzie did not immediately give herself over to it. She was dedicated to a more oppositional art practice, a kind of "resistance" to the prevailing trends. Again, she pursued etching, establishing a "principle where each body of work would be on one plate," building up a dense surface and a "pentimento effect" that endures in her work to this day. She produced artists' books using overlaid images combined with obscured parcels of autobiographical text; participated in a much-acclaimed mail-art project; exhibited in alternative and university galleries in both Montreal and Toronto; attracted critical and curatorial attention; and was collected by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Although Molinari was not her supervisor, Mackenzie was much influenced by his powerful presence. "One of the things that I had really been paying attention to at graduate school was the intense passion that Guido had about painting. "Hard-edge and controlled as his works appeared, Mackenzie says he still advocated an intuitive relationship to colour and process. She says that Molinari too, had been challenged by Harold Town to "convert" her to painting, "That was part of the art-parental structure, the contest between these two enormous Canadian painters, They both took a special interest to make sure I wasn't wasted on this other 'minor' art."

It wasn't until after Mackenzie had written her thesis (on the autobiographical element in contemporary art) and graduated from Concordia, after she'd received considerable recognition for her prints and a Canada Council grant to pursue them, after she'd bought herself a press and produced an artist's book that she gave herself permission to paint. It was a rather provisional permission, "I thought, I'll just get this out of my system," Mackenzie says, laughing again. She built herself a big stretcher and "started to figure out what painting was." But did it, she says, "in a very secretive way. To use colour, coming from NSCAD, was like heresy."

The paintings, undertaken in 1979 and 1980, were "pretty awful" she says, describing them as "large landscapes with fish." They conflated memories of both the Yukon and Newfoundland, where she had spent time as an undergraduate printmaker. A significant shift occurred after Mackenzie traveled to London, England in late 1982 and spent three weeks in the galleries and museums looking - really looking - at paintings, among them "the nocturnal Whistlers." (Other influences, encountered closer to home, were Paterson Ewen and Albert Pinkham Ryder.) Returning to Montreal, Mackenzie undertook her "Lost River" series; with the initial pair she won first prize in the Third Biennale of Painting.

These large works embraced the "energy of the new figurative painting," reconstructed historic notions of northern landscape as imaged by the Group of Seven, and established a "conversation," as Mackenzie describes it, between her "conceptual upbringing at NSCAD and the formalist agenda of Montreal and its denial of figuration."

As in her etchings, Mackenzie laid down and scraped out many layers of visual "information." She worked in a neo-Fauvist style, with rich, dark, non-naturalistic colours, flattened and aerial perspectives, and partitioned compositions. These twilight landscapes, with their jigsawed lakes and rivers, hills and plains, bright snow and deep darkness, are inhabited by generic northern creatures, part wolf, part caribou, without ears or tails, and functioning as human surrogates. The mood they establish is sometimes deeply distressed, often melancholy. In the "Lost River" series, Mackenzie is not only addressing a mythical notion of North, she is posing it against social and environmental issues, including the huge scars made on the tundra by mining, the havoc wreaked by pipelines on indigenous peoples and migratory animals, and the poverty of northern communities.

There is also an autobiographical subtext to these works, one that admits Mackenzie's tumultuous personal life, her experiences of love, romance and separation, sexuality, pregnancy and abortion. "There was a whole undercurrent to my life," she recalls, "going through all sorts of drama and conflicts." The paintings, "were like mending structures," a way of dealing with very difficult decisions and feelings of loss." After 1983 and the birth of her first child, the personal became more pressingly allegorical. Mackenzie was leading a frantic existence, living part of the week with her partner in Toronto, commuting to Montreal to teach, defying warnings that motherhood would sabotage her art career, while coming to terms with the real impact of nursing and child-care - all this in the shadow of what had been a very difficult labour and birth. Within two weeks of an emergency c-section, though, she was back in her painting studio, her baby in a Snuggly on her back, looking at her canvases and thinking, "these are far too small for what I've just been through." She doubled their size to 13 feet long. The "Cluny" series, named after her son, continued her deconstruction of northern landscape painting in light of the emotional and physical experience of motherhood. Using deer-like creatures as human surrogates, she depicted a condition of painful separateness between male and female realms of experience.

Other landscape series followed, moving away from animal-figural allegories but continuing an investigation of notions of place, identity and winter, and more actively integrating themes of environmental concern. Despite the topicality of her issues, though, Mackenzie found her painting practice challenged after her move to Vancouver, by the ascendancy of photo-based art and by a school of Feminist thinking that deplored painting's patriarchal history and associations. Lectures and workshop by visiting feminists were influential in Vancouver in the late '80s, especially those of art historian Griselda Pollock and artist Mary Kelly. Mackenzie remembers a 1987 talk by Pollock in which the message to women artists was that it would "probably be impossible for them to turn the site around" the site being painting, especially painting the female subject. "Her argument seemed to be that the patriarchal gaze was structured in such a way, was so dominant and fixed," Mackenzie says, that really women can't shift it."

Her response was to immediately insert a pair of small, nude, female figures into a work-in-progress. They were the first female nudes she'd produced since her undergraduate days. "The taboo is the same as at NSCAD," she says. "You got the men telling you not to paint there and the women telling you not to paint here, and in some way it triggers the same type of resistance." Titled *Island*, the 13-foot-long canvas compasses issues of West Coast landscape construction, native land claims and eco-conservation, but is overlaid with issues of "maternal space" and sexuality, as imaged by the figures of a birthing woman and an adolescent girl. These are awkward and oddly floating little figures, drawn almost schematically in thinly applied black lines, and suspended in space and time.

The series of paintings that followed, combining stereotypes of Canadian identity (like canoes and sleds) with linear female figures, were met by "deafening silence" from her colleagues. Having worked through the literal depiction of female experience, Mackenzie allowed herself to drop the figure from view. Still, the female body, continued to be felt in the scale of the work, the physicality of its process, the sensuousness of its colour, and the voices submerged beneath its surfaces. Mackenzie's "Saskatchewan Paintings" are, again, an examination of a mythical notion of place, in this case, the prairies the - "interior lowlands," the "desert heart," the vast "middle" of the country. How Saskatchewan has been colonized and constructed, mapped and documented; how its many and various voices have been orchestrated to play a single tune, to make the single "territorial claim" of displacing aboriginal people and title; the establishment of routes of exploration, trade and commerce; the arbitrariness of drawn borders; and the history of the Northwest Rebellion, are among the themes pursued in the half-dozen canvases that comprise the series so far. All of these historic, geographic and political themes have been interwoven with the fictive and the autobiographical, manifest, not only in the paintings but also in Mackenzie's related performances and bookworks.

The surprise is that work with such a huge and complex intellectual agenda can be so simply beautiful. Mackenzie has given herself over to luminous colour, evocative form and rich, tapestry like texture. She has given herself permission to shift from figuration to abstraction and back again, to lay down great swatches of pink and violet and canary yellow, to partially obscure their vividness with black and deep blue, and then to float lights again on the darkness, like lanterns on a night river. Like signals from a painting place.

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