

Landon

Mackenzie

A splendid tale of two cities and two artists

By John Bentley Mays

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No lover of the old-fashioned stuff and matter of painting can afford to pass up the Harold Klunder and Landon Mackenzie double bill at Mercer Union (333 Adelaide St. W.) through April 2 – two focused, engaging shows that recall much that's good, and much that's problematic, about advanced contemporary painting in Toronto and Montreal.

Since 1976, Montreal painter Landon Mackenzie has been spending long stretches in the Yukon, and the five paintings she shows at Mercer Union are existential memoirs of her several sojourns in that desolation.

Excerpted from Miss Mackenzie's Lost River Series, each of these large works, at one interesting level, is a recent moment in the long history of Canadian depiction of far-flung mountain fastnesses. But unlike the nineteenth-century Canadian painters' works of conquered nature and sun-lit peaks, Miss Mackenzie's paintings are emotionally galvanized, anxious meditations on the long nights, fears and hungers of the far north. Using dry, gloomy acrylic blues, blacks and browns, sparely and beautifully handled, she invokes ghostly, dog-like wolves which stalk and congregate in the near-darkness, feast on their prey and (in the finest work on view) stop by a lonely, haunted mountain pool to drink.

If Miss Mackenzie aimed to give us five powerful allegories of the world's deeper hungers and fears, she has nearly succeeded. She alludes to the trendy conventions of New York image-painting too literally and uncritically, and her resonant glooms just stay heavy without ever becoming profound. Even so, this young and intelligent artist has managed to produce images which haunt and harry our assumptions about painting and, perhaps, about the world as well.