

# Landon

# Mackenzie

**Landon Mackenzie: Mercer Union  
by Rick Rhodes  
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Landon Mackenzie's paintings evoke a dream space. Disorientation is the rule of the game as bodies float, edges blur forms thin into transparency and colors wander. The subject matter relates to trips she has made to the North -- you see bears, evolves, fish, deer, glaciated landscapes and star streaked night skies -- but it has been pulled outside in. The compass doesn't point north anymore; it points to memory, fantasy and sleep. The series is called *Lost River Series* and it's understood that between the river banks, it's the unconsciousness flowing.

None of this was so apparent when I first saw the series last fall in Montreal. As I remember the paintings, they weren't as personal or subjective. They were stiffer, recalling, in the way the animals were drawn, North American Indian art. In linking with that art they connected with its mythic qualities and its huge cosmological scale. It didn't work. The paintings were sluggish with all that archetypal weight. They seemed second-hand, with a taint of exploiting the Indian sources.

But now I want to change my mind. A few of the Montreal paintings have come to Toronto with newer work and the newer work throws a back light that makes me think I was over-reacting to something temporary and inconsequential. In spirit the work is too European, too materialistic for the associations with Indian art to count for anything. Those largely come with the subject matter. Mackenzie is more concerned with individual perception than with belief systems. What counts is that her images reduce to one psyche, one dreamer. The concern of the paintings, in pragmatic Caucasian fashion, is to realize this as fully as possible. And the paintings are full. They manifest a great descriptive capacity. The qualities of the paint and the way that it is applied are in perfect harmony with the imagery and the needs of the theme. I could look again and again at the way which the close-toned black, broken and maroon colours of the backgrounds open up to divulge the foreground images with a particularly charged slowness. The reticence invokes an intuitive mental state appropriate for looking at dreamland. You feel easy with the precise kind of vagueness that the slow-surfacing images describe. The mood is trance-like until, suddenly, you are jarred by a vivid splash of colour that provokes a different chain of reverie. Reverie is probably the wrong word here; what happens is that the fantasy takes on a physical immediacy--the feel is more like a brush with reality. In one painting, for instance, as you move your eyes left, soft pinkish shapes understood to be reflections of cloud in water evolve into pink-red fish. These fish spark a kind of doubling up of awareness of the water. No longer just a surface reflecting clouds, it takes on depth. Wetness seems immediate and you feel connected with the fish almost by a sense of touch.

This tactile empathy interests me most about the work. Mackenzie goes past the lightness, the wistfulness, the cerebral quality of art that tries to embody a dream state. In bits and pieces her work always reaches down to a sensual plane. You never forget that the dreaming involves a body. You sense dimly, as dimly as the colours that hover inside one another, that the work is flushed with sexual undertones. Nothing is explicit, but the animals and the landscape seem to play out human intimacies.

In another painting (Where were the titles, Mercer Union?), fish curl and chase each other up from the bottom of a river bed to a point where a wolf, drinking, disturbs the surface of the water with two bright red concentric ovals. From this feminine image the wolf then evaporates into a mountain, hair turning into stone, until the scene ends in an indigo sky turning black. But then at the top of the painting this continuous rising upward motion is clipped flat by a sudden new horizon line overhung with banks of gray wind torn clouds. This final gust of cold air reflexively heats up the lower part of the painting, heats up the dream part, giving it the sense of a fitful sex fantasy. a fantasy not visually descriptive so much as descriptive of the sensations moving across the skin, sensations

which the dreaming brain turns into images.

With this kind of richness and range, the work is not the kind that places easily. If anything, its vitality makes it seem a little out of step. Recent painting tends to deal in thinner realities and emotions. It's ironic and loss-conscious, appropriate to a time of recession and shrinking expectations. Mackenzie fits in slightly by raising ecological concerns with her images of ghost animals reduced to black silhouettes moving like night shadows. But mostly the work retires from the public realm. It offers instead a powerfully realized personal world. The work catches you up not in ideological or conceptual terms but almost on the level of physiology. That is its no mean achievement.