

# Landon

# Mackenzie

**Shadowing the mapmakers:** Artist Landon Mackenzie retraces the landscapes charted by early explorers and cartographers

**By Alan Morantz**

**Canadian Geographic** November – December 2001

One of the earliest-known cartographic representations of what is now North America is *The Map of the North Atlantic coast of the New World*, taken from an anonymous Portuguese atlas and dated to circa 1540. What catches the modern eye are the pictures adorning the unknown lands: a unicorn, an elephant and ferocious lions that seem ready to enchant, amaze or devour the come-from-aways. The map was drawn by a French artist who clearly had never set eyes on the mysterious world beyond the European horizon.

Throughout the Age of Discovery that followed, artists were often right beside explorers, drawing or painting maps from the rough charts made by navigators, adding some monsters in uncharted waters for good measure. Once the New World was settled, of course, maps rarely showed an artistic flourish. Cartography was left to cartographers, art to artists. It is a distinction that Landon Mackenzie greets with rolled eyes and a shake of the head.

Mackenzie is among Canada's most accomplished artists, with the awards, teaching assignments and shows that mark her impact on the country's art community. But her fascination with the exploration of Western Canada, her knowledge of the manner in which the country's maps were made and her ability to incorporate mapping conventions into art all qualify her as a creative cartographer of the first order. It is as if she were in the canoe with that legendary explorer Samuel Hearne in 1770, drawing an alternative picture of exploration as he probed the Northwest. Far from obliterating conventional maps, Mackenzie's apocryphal paintings start with facsimiles of significant charts from Canada's past that she then layers with her own stories and impressions. What results is still a map, but you are not quite sure where it takes you. "Those tidy red lines," she says. "That fascinates me."

Mackenzie's commitment to understanding Canada through its maps is easy to comprehend in light of her upbringing. Her great-uncle, George Douglas, was an accomplished Arctic traveller and explorer; he led an expedition down the Coppermine River in 1911 using a map sketched by Hearne. Mackenzie has memories of her great-uncle telling her stories of the North, though he died when she was 10. "The little red line on the fold-out map at the back of his book *Lands Forlorn*, published in 1914, became a calling to the imagination." Mackenzie says from her Vancouver studio. But it was Douglas's wife — Aunt Chinka — who would have the most enduring impact. "My armchair-travelling techniques were learned at the skirt of my great-aunt, Frances Mackenzie Douglas, at Stony Lake and Lakefield, Ont., until she died in the mid-1990s," says Mackenzie, who was brought up in Toronto. "She organized the memory of his trip. What food was taken, what materials, what instruments, what ammunition, tents. I revelled in her knowledge of the 'North.'"

Mackenzie finally did go north, to the Yukon, in 1976. After studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, she worked for the Yukon government through the spring and summer in a job that was filled with irony: she was a painter who converted road signs from miles to kilometres. The Yukon continued to cast a spell over her, even when she was back south attending graduate school at Concordia University in Montreal. She returned to the Yukon and tried to experience it as others had before her. She ran the rivers, climbed the mountains and obsessed over the migration of caribou.

As an artist, Mackenzie first attracted attention in 1981 when she won first prize at the Quebec Biennale of Painting for her *Lost River Series*. The paintings featured dark images populated by wolf-caribou hybrid creatures

prowling in silhouette. her next body of work, named the *Cluny* series, again borrowed from her Yukon experiences, with strange creatures stalking the land.

Always in Mackenzie's mind were the circumstances under which the great maps of the day were assembled and the far-reaching effects they had on Canada's development.

"These guys were trekking through the bush with their instruments, keeping their guides in line, keeping themselves in line." she says. "Then they would go back to London or Ottawa and have their notes transcribed by a printing house, tidy up the maps so that the person paying for the trek would be pleased."

Over time, Mackenzie decided to approach her painting in a way similar to how her friend, Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart, approaches her writing. Urquhart uses pieces of documented history and extrapolates a fantasy. Though maps do not have the same linear progression as a novel, they are still storytelling vehicles, so Mackenzie set out to create a different sort of historical fiction. Before putting brush to canvas, however, she had to immerse herself in historical cartography. Beginning in 1993, she became a regular at map archives across Canada and visited the map room at Cambridge University's Scott Polar Research Institute in England. She chummed with the archivists so that they would allow her extra time and access to the material and opportunities to photograph some of the most interesting maps. ("I get so excited when I see some of these maps," she says. "You have to pull me off the ceiling.")

Knowing from her own experience that there was always more to the map than met the eye, Mackenzie searched the records and accounts for clues to what the maps served to obscure. She wondered how women viewed the same space and their role in exploration, which at the time was a male privilege. And she noted that while explorers were almost totally dependent on aboriginals to move overland, their contributions were rarely acknowledged.

Archivists in Saskatchewan were particularly accommodating, which was one reason why in the early 1990s she decided to begin a series of paintings there. It was in *Saskatchewan* paintings (1993-97) that she started making use of maps, mining information and other archival records, blending them with her own observations within the layers of the pictures. She explored how maps and language served to establish colonial claims and to displace the aboriginal inhabitants. On maps of her own design, she wanted to trace the trajectory of exploration, to untangle the stories caught in the thatch of official maps, treaties and the accounts of explorers.

As the Saskatchewan series was wrapping up, Mackenzie began looking for material dating from Captain John Palliser's map and commentary, political pressures arose to make the prairies "productive," giving rise to new forms of maps by geologists and railway titans. Mackenzie now had a new use for the piles of information she had collected over the years on the districts of Saskatchewan and Assiniboia. Her next project explored the mental and historical territory of Athabasca.

"What interests me in looking at historic maps is how the notations and calculations every five years change the truth about the representation of that space," she says. "If you take Lake Athabasca as a hit point, you can see how many different ways it's spelled, different ways it's drawn. It's like a hub; who goes in and out. Also Athabasca was a fantasy of British exploration of space: I'm going into the Athabasca."

As an artist-cartographer, Mackenzie does not obliterate the recognizable maps of the past. Instead, she invites the viewer to acknowledge that past and the way the stories of that time were told and then see the uncharted maps and hear the disembodied voices. In her approach to the works in the *Tracking Athabasca* series, she started with several maps of Athabasca, looking at the region from different vantage points and working with a scale of one inch on the map to one foot on her pictures. The paintings are all massive and densely configured. She works within the format by laying the canvas on the ground and stepping onto it to fill it up.

"The dimensions work so that I can make sense of this one-inch-to-one-foot grid.; it makes sense of the body being lost in the space as opposed to a nice large-sized painting," she says. "We've become too accustomed to how we negotiate a picture. I want people to fall off the periphery. And I want to seduce them from 40 feet away and four inches away. In some places, as you walk closer to them, they develop into a precarious balance of chaos and order, and for others, as you walk toward them, they develop into more clarity and detail."

A good example of the shifting focus that Mackenzie speaks of can be seen in *Mackenzie to Thy Other Side (Land*

of *Little Sticks*), completed in 1999. Stand 30 metres away, and the eye immediately zones in on acid-yellow splotches, which, if she offered a legend to her map, would indicate abstract warning signs for deposits of uranium tailings. Black discs, frozen ponds or core sample holes from mining exploration hover like UFOs. Lines transect the terrain with the seeming logic of a map. snowflakes lie suspended over fur country. green dots, seen from the side, appear like pompoms. Take four steps forward, and you will notice the makings of the boreal forest and the treeline. Step closer still, and you will begin to make out words and phrases: "After a draught of Nelson & Hayes's Rivers"; "Deer hedge where the French had a place of worship." South of the treeline, it is easy to make out a red grid of the map; north of the treeline, the grid is but a shadow.

Elements of the painting were initially laid down in collaboration with a friend from Fort Chipewyan, a community on Lake Athabasca. Doris Whitehead, of Cree, Chipewyan and Scottish ancestry, talked to Mackenzie about her complex and sometimes tragic childhood while drawing a diagram of her northern village on the linen stapled to Mackenzie's studio floor. During the all-day visit, Whitehead said, "I'm also a descendant of Governor Simpson. It's rumoured that he fathered over 200 children when he was factor at Fort Chipewyan."

Mackenzie recalls the shock of the insight: "I went, Ding! These guys left their genetic code all across the North. There was this tension, certainly in Hudson's Bay memoirs, about what to do with the men, because they were not military men used to holding in their libido."

Mackenzie had invited Whitehead to draw a map of Fort Chipewyan to teach her about the social, economic and religious conditions of life there. Whitehead's contemporary map begins the story of *Macke it to Thy Other Side*; it was first drawn in Magic Marker and then overwritten by Mackenzie in paint. The map was oriented with north facing down and had places marked, such as Safety (grandmother's place) and Danger. If you look closely, you can make out the map in places, Safety peeking out in a bit of appliqué encrusted by layers of acrylic. There are white blobs, which could be snowfalls or stand-ins for sexual spoor left by explorers.

There are five other maps in the *Tracking Athabasca* series, including *Winter Road*, *Diamond Mines*, where the effect is much cooler than *Macke it to Thy Other Side*; its surface is layered with beads, lace doilies and cut-glass stones. *In Space Station (Falls Said to Be the Largest in the Known World So Far)*, Mackenzie offers a view of Athabasca from a satellite beyond the pull of gravity.

The pieces in *Tracking Athabasca* are unmistakably Canadian meditations. Mackenzie, after all, had lived in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia and the Yukon and was spoon-fed on the exploits of her great-uncle. She has been out on the land and understands the folds of rock and the smells of the forest and tundra, much like the explorers and fur traders of Athabasca. But her sanctuary is the Vancouver warehouse studio where she has worked for the past 15 years, a cross between a laboratory and an urban wilderness. It has high ceilings and smells like an old factory; a row of windows opens to the North Shore mountains and the squawks of seagulls. Inside are paints, maps, books, doilies, sequins, working clothes, slides, camp kitchen, cot, old photographs and piles of notes.

In the studio are four large paintings, unfinished but well along. They are the first works from Mackenzie's next series, titled *Houbart's Hope*, the third part of her trilogy. The title was inspired by a 1636 map of Hudson Bay; "Hope" is a safe harbour for Hudson's Bay traders who find themselves in a harsh, unfamiliar environment. "Houbart" is a friendly ghostly force in Mackenzie's imagination.

"The title also fits the idea of the brain as a new frontier with its own hemispheres and veins like rivers and layers of water like oceans," she says. "A sequence of water roads eventually leading into the interior, penetrating the imaginative space." For this body of work, Mackenzie is researching a variety of scientific imaging tools — MRI and CAT scans among them. No doubt, they will show up somewhere in *Houbart's Hope*, pointing the way to deeper ground.