

# Landon

# Mackenzie

## **This Place and Some Other: The Solitary Journey of Landon Mackenzie** **By Jack Liang**

The story is always partial  
Partial to what, you ask.  
To nothing;  
a fragment,  
merely a fragment.

Vera Frenkel, ...*from the Transit Bar*

I was driving around the northwest corner of Algonquin Park, circumventing it really, when the revelation occurred. At the time it seemed quite momentous, though six hours behind the wheel will tend to numb your critical judgment. In retrospect, of course, I realize it wasn't much of a revelation at all. But you'll forgive a city boy from the banana belt of Ontario his thoughts of discovering the "real country" when he's passing through this part of the world. Surrounded as I was that day by those "Group of Seven" landscapes – the rolling hills, the jack pines – I found myself remarking to my companion about the cultural significance of this imagery, about its quintessential "Canadianness". My companion, having lived most of her life in this part of the country, shrugged.

The reaction caught me by surprise, jolted me out of my reverie. Here I thought everyone felt the same visceral connection to the hinterland when along comes my weary travel companion, bored to tears by the endless scenery. Her indifference rattled my assumptions about this stretch of the near-north being somehow more Canadian than any other place in the country, about "as Canadian as you can get," as I recall saying. As if one can prorate these things. Admittedly, my sweeping remarks had no intellectual legs to stand on. For to say that this place was more Canadian than any other was arguably to conclude that my companion – having hailed from these part – was more Canadian than I. Which, of course, is ludicrous, but this is what happens when you make monologic pronouncements.

I am torn, however; part of me still clinging to romantic notions of the country while another part is mindful of the need to question these ideas. I hesitate to follow those who would demystify the landscape for me. But I know that the wilderness is not all that defines us. Having grown up "across the river" from the United States – literally in its shadow – the view I saw had little in common with the hills of the Ottawa Valley or the north shore of Lake Superior (or, for that matter, the skyline of Toronto). Nevertheless I was conditioned to regard those landscapes as part of my identity. Just as I was taught that my founding fathers were British and French, though I myself neither.

And so when I see a painter like Landon Mackenzie showing me her vision of the northern tundra, or her vision of Saskatchewan, two places I have never been, I can still recognize that we both share the same vague cultural references. That is, we are both Canadians looking at paintings about Canada. And when she is playing with these shared assumptions to reveal the stories beneath the surface, to demythologize, so to speak, our received ideas about place, again, I am an ally to her project. And, moreover, that she can speak of these received ideas and hidden stories in paintings that are so exquisite, so beautiful to look at, I am reminded that there are no absolutes, that we can both revere and question, and that on approach does not preclude the other.

We can talk about "place" when we talk about Mackenzie's work, place in its various forms: myths of the Canadian landscape, physical and emotional territories, question of geography and voice. We can talk of place as

marker, as a record of who we are, or more to the point, who we're *supposed to be*. This, in a way, is Mackenzie's motif, the loose thread that binds her work. Mind you, it has never been so much a conscious scheme for her as it has been a series of the mind, where faulty memories and altered truths reside.

Consider Mackenzie's *Lost River* paintings of the early 1980s. Here are pictures of landscapes and creatures we know like the backs of our hands (or, for that matter, like the back of our money), images firmly entrenched in our Canadian ethos. Yet Mackenzie's version of things strikes us somewhat discordantly. Neither "picture-book" nor heroic, Mackenzie's imagery is, rather, only strangely familiar – like an acquaintance's half-brother. The paintings, with their fragile shapes, ruptured perspectives, dark fields of "ever-twilight", suggest that something here is amiss. Simply put, the *Lost River* paintings advise that the North is not the awe-inspiring wonder of our lore and longing. Though it is this too, it is other things. These paintings are Mackenzie's effort to deconstruct historic notions of the North; not so much as to render them completely powerless, but to position these mythical concepts against a backdrop of other concerns.

There are social and environmental issues at play here, issues such as the disturbance of the northern ecology or the poverty of northern communities – slippery slopes for any artist to tackle, let alone one whom some would consider an "outsider" to these concerns. (Though it's precisely the issue of what constitutes "otherness" that seems to be at the heart of Mackenzie's ongoing work.) Her paintings speak of our alienation from Nature. That they do this without becoming maudlin is a tribute to Mackenzie's deft hand and her works' subtle emotional power. The paintings are built up in successive layers of imagery, like a quasi-story which Mackenzie makes up as she goes along. Other creatures, for example, are painted in and then buried by subsequent layers. The result is a dense and somber space as deceptively complex as the themes that inform the work.

Small dramas appear to unfold, which is not to suggest that the paintings are in anyway narrative. But the visual economy is such that one tends to recognize *implied* temporalities, a sense that we are happening upon an event at a heightened moment of drama. Taken on its own, each *Lost River* painting is like a single frame from a filmstrip, a frozen moment which implicates itself in some story, but on its own, can never reveal this story. So that in a work like *Lost River no. 12* (1981), and animal "captured" at a water hole provides the element for some poignant scene, a pregnant moment. Against the backdrop of an icy tundra, a wolf-like creature dips its mouth into the murky water and is frozen there. The sense of arrest is punctuated by two bright concentric circles around the animal's mouth, ripples of water radiating from the point of contact. But the rippling is stopped prematurely. Though we know the circles should continue radiating outward, they are forever stilled by the inertness of paint.

The point is that something is "happening" in this picture. What that something is remains to be determined. For the situation, like the animals that populate the *Lost River* paintings, is ambiguous. Yet the iconography is not, that is, not really. Our familiarity with the imagery of the North may stem more from imagination than recall, but these ideas are the reason something seems to be going on here. That heroicism we see in, say, a Lawren Harris arctic scene is replaced by a darker, more distressed vision, purporting to tell us that we've got it all wrong.

Strong triangular components repeat ever-upward toward a solid ice field or an ominous white sky. (The distinction is irrelevant since Mackenzie often, and purposefully, disrupts perspective to heighten the sense of disturbance.) It's a stark geometry reminiscent of Harris' arctic-scapes. But if Mackenzie is quoting the Group of Seven artist, she is doing so only to expose the other stories not included in the Group's mythmaking project. Mackenzie depicts our connection with Nature in less-than-heroic terms. It's a vision of the land as a humble, vulnerable entity.

In *Lost River no. 14* (1981), the dark, jagged field of the landscape presses down upon two animals, one wounded or dead, the other only slightly better. The pointed edge of the dark field encroaches upon the head of the wounded creature, in a sense pinning the animal to the ground. The second creature, itself on the verge of collapse, is confined to a small patch of land in the bottom corner of the painting. It isn't difficult to grasp the import of this imagery; its allusions are quite clear. The sharp separations of light and dark become a symbol of the realities of northern life. The painting is at once an allegory about our disturbance of the land, and a manifestation of our idyllic myths colliding with the reality of this region. Scars run across the surface of the painted landscape, their serrated geometric pattern sitting in contrast to the enervated creatures. These tracks in the terrain call to mind a number of images: a barbed-wire fence, surgical stitches, even a sketchy outline of some razor-edged paper airplane. Implicit in the imagery is the act of intrusion by industry into the ecology of the North – the mines, for example, that hollow out the earth and tear up the land. In these sharp wedges of paint, these harsh geometries, Mackenzie creates the evidence of this human interference. A white path cuts its way across

the dark fields of paint, suggesting a paved road. Further up the painting, a straight blue strip juts away from a larger ribbon of blue, like a man-made canal diverging the water from its natural course.

These paintings are the residue of Mackenzie's memories, gleamed from several extended trips to the Yukon where she witnessed first-hand the effects of mining and development on the North. Mackenzie presents these visions to us with a restrained poeticism, relying on the mood to convey the message. And, really, the message has more to do with a personal, interior world anyway, more than it does with any world we know or imagine "out there." These are the landscapes of the mind: as much about our alienation from Nature as our impact on it, as much about our "ideas" of the wilderness as our depiction of it. "What is natural is not always external," as Margaret Atwood pointed out in *Survival*, her thematic study of Canadian literature. Attitudes toward Nature, Atwood claimed, inevitably return to attitudes toward our own bodies and toward sexuality. Underpinning the *Lost River* paintings is such an autobiographical subtext, one which bears the traumas of Mackenzie's personal life – her loves and her losses. These are veiled references, of course, and we may be forgiven for overlooking them. For Mackenzie is not offering us a confessional, and we are not asking for one. What she does give us is a shared space within which to consider the public and private realms of Nature. These generic animals are the surrogates for our collective notions of the North, and the projections of a personal feeling of loss for that world we've pushed into the realm of legend.

The unassailable force of Nature is a persistent motif whose long narrative history exists to this day in the art and literature of our country. "Nature and Monster," against whose infinite powers we struggle for our survival – it's a theme from the earliest pages of our colonial history, reinforced in our collective consciousness by the hallowed paintings of the Group and their contemporaries. Granted, few of us wholly subscribe to this notion of the country as some "untamed" wilderness. But in a land where most of the population is confined to a narrow strip along the southern border, where so much of the terrain remains uninhabited, it's hard to deny the wilderness' place within our cultural identity (thus far). It's part of our collective consciousness though seldom part of our daily life. It's the other and us at the same time. So then what are we to make of these motifs, these grand inventions of a place and a country borne from the romantic canvases of Tom Thomson or the Group of Seven? Do we, like Friedrich's Wanderer, stand before ineffable Nature – our own ineffable Nature – pondering slack-jawed at some mythical notion of the wilderness? Probably not.

But these sentiments still have purchase within our culture, which is why Mackenzie does what she does. Here is a project that aims to reconcile the physical and the psychological territories of our identity. It's an investigation which has taken her across many terrains – geography, history, knowledge, painting – to give voice to the hidden stories that are buried in the wake of dominant narratives and "official" histories, as if to show that our identity consists of more than one jack pine on a rocky crag. The paradox of Mackenzie's art is that, in an effort to shed light on these silent stories, her paintings actually conceal more than they could ever reveal. This paradox is none more evident than in her recent body of work, the *Saskatchewan Paintings*.

Here is landscape painting in its most abstract sense; not so much about the landscape we see as the one we don't. Like the *Lost River* works, these paintings are about the territories of the mind, about what we imagine a place to be and how these notions collide with what they really are. My knowledge of Saskatchewan is slight, but in a way I am Mackenzie's model viewer. I come to these works with preconceived visions of endless wheat fields and wide open spaces. Though Saskatchewan is this, it is also other things. And Mackenzie's paintings show us that there is this multiplicity of issues to consider. She does this, mind you, not by revealing the specific issues *per se*, but rather by depicting the *complexity* itself. For these is only so much a painting can do. It can't tell you the whole story, but it can point you in the right direction.

And complexity is the crux of these works. You see it in the laboriously handwritten texts which cover the surfaces of the paintings; in the way these texts become concealed, rendered illegible by the layers of imagery, paint, map tracings, dark voids and starry lights that constitute these palimpsests of many ideas. The texts themselves are from a variety of sources – historical records, cowboy songs, Mackenzie's own prose-poetry. It's a desultory use of fragments which speaks of a many-voiced, but oft-silent, history. These paintings demand time from the viewer – time enough for the hidden stories to filter to the surface, time enough for the eyes to wander across the varied terrain. And indeed these paintings *are* like terrain, with the build-up of elements and the raised handwritten text mimicking a physical topography and alluding to a metaphorical one.

For Mackenzie, it's been a peripatetic journey, one which has taken her from sea to sea and north of 60. She has lived many parts of the country, "with driver's licences to prove it." But Saskatchewan is a place she has only

visited. It is somewhere she goes to become anonymous, to disappear for a while in the coffee shops and bus depots to record her musings about a region she has come to know intimately. A “flaneuse” on her solitary journey. She has pored over maps and records in the provincial archives, has taught herself about the history – official and otherwise – of this postage-stamp province with its arbitrary borders. In some corners, she is branded an “outsider” for dropping herself into a place to talk about issues to which she has no claims. But Saskatchewan is, as Mackenzie says, “a part of [her] identity by its absence,” in the same way that the North is a nationalist metaphor though few of us have actually been there. Mackenzie is from this country but not from all of its parts. And it’s this constant need to define ourselves by where we are from that informs her art.

As the *Lost River* works describe a fictional territory, so too the *Saskatchewan Paintings*. Within these canvases, matters of imagination meet matters of record. Texts transcribed from historical documents interweave with Mackenzie’s own prose, everything floating in and (mostly) out of legibility. The resulting polyphony of voices alludes to the many narratives that go unrecognized in official accounts or uninformed generalizations. There are political and geographical themes which include the displacement of native populations, the arbitrariness of borders, the establishment of trade and travel routes, the history of the Northwest Rebellion. There are also traces of a personal quest – secret desires, encounters, dilemmas of gender and painting. Any attempt to follow one theme is inevitably interrupted by the appearance of another.

Black voids punch through the surfaces of many of these works. Like representations of the unrepresentable, they are Mackenzie’s way of acknowledging marginalized histories without pretending to know these histories. In *If I Loved A Cowboy.../Leaving Her Fingerprints all over Everything She Does* (1994), these black spaces take the form of elliptical “rabbit holes”, which seem to lead to some underground world. There are traces of writing within the holes, suggesting that the dark spaces are not so much “voids” as they are passageways to other viable places beneath the (physical and metaphorical) surface, like journeying through the thousands of years of history before the “official” colonial one. Rabbits hover elusively around the holes – jots of figuration in an abstract world, which (without pushing it) might suggest Mackenzie’s willful transgression of painting taboos (whatever they may be).

There are desires here to follow the bunny down the hole, à la Alice; to escape for a while from her responsibilities, from her life in Vancouver, for a fling maybe with some prairie cowboy. This is Saskatchewan for Mackenzie, a place of longing, a place to “disappear off the radar/between destinations...In New York, but not...” Just to vanish for a while, not forever. And, as if to reassure you of her intentions to return, she’s leaving her fingerprints around the hole, in case you ever do need to find her.

Quatrefoils replace the rabbit holes in *Gabriel’s Crossing to Humboldt* (1994). Here, two dark clover-shapes anchor the centre of the painting, reminiscent of gothic windows but also of the patterns formed by crop irrigation circles. The grid which underlines this painting bears reference to the maps of Saskatchewan produced in the last century by the Dominion Land Survey. Indeed, the grid is a common element in all the *Saskatchewan Paintings*, evoking issues of land allotment, monolithic histories, modernism. But these works in the *Saskatchewan* series – and *Gabriel’s Crossing* is no exception – avoid being pinned down to any single issue. They’re about the multitude of voices, about making the smallest detail equal to the weightiest. The title “Gabriel’s Crossing to Humboldt”, which to me evokes grand thoughts of the Archangel Gabriel, or perhaps some other “epic” crossings in history (Washington and the Potomac; Attila and the Alps), is in fact lifted from an historical map detailing a ferry crossing operated by Gabriel Dumont. It’s a small point supposing the larger issue of the Metis rebellions. Other paintings too explore this theme. A hangman’s gallows in *Palliser’s Triangle* (1997) evokes the execution of Louis Riel. Maps with train routes call to mind the Canadian Pacific Railway, so instrumental in quelling the rebellion in 1885.

If all that I have said thus far seems rather unfocussed, it’s because Mackenzie wants it that way. Nothing is clear in these paintings; nothing, that is, but the clarity which comes from knowing that the waters *are* indeed muddy, and that to admit otherwise is at best naïve and at worst historical hood-winking. The paintings are vast – like the prairies that inspired them – and nothing less would seem appropriate for such ambitious work. These are not *haikus*, with a sparse clarity. These are densely woven narratives with multiple themes and points of reference. I have only touched upon a few of these themes. There are others – ideas about the dilemma of painting, about gender and the body, about mapping, writing, and personal pains and struggles. But Mackenzie isn’t expecting you to “get” all of this. You can’t anyway. What she does ask, though, is that you stay a while, linger among the voices, wander the painted terrain, take some time.

To look at these paintings is to look from many vantage points – like standing in the middle of a wheat field, gazing up at a 360 sky, seeing all at once the beginning, middle and end of a coming rainstorm. It is like that, but also like perching yourself up high, looking down upon the scene as one does upon a map. And so, when you think you've figured out the map, when you think you know exactly where you are, you end up someplace completely different.

Given the intellectual rigour of Mackenzie's project, it's sometimes easy to forget just how beautiful her paintings *look*. At least, it is when you're writing about the work; standing in front of one of these canvases, it's the first thing you notice. Like a guilty pleasure, I would suspect. The paintings are, perhaps, "too generous," as a dealer recently said to her. But then what is the matter with that? For all the musings about mythical notions of place – be they imaginary Norths or prairies of the mind – it is, in the end, the *frisson* of sheer visual experience that is most poignant here. And why should we be denied this direct engagement with the beauty of these paintings? As if there were some inverse relation between how they look and how much they mean. Beneath the layers of paint, text and imagery, beneath the dense velvety sheens or tapestry-like surfaces, there are, I know, timely issues at hand. And I *am* intrigued by this complex agenda, by Mackenzie's moves through the cultural and critical minefields of the latter third of the twentieth century. But there is, I'll admit, a part of me that just wants to stare at the sheer gorgeousness of her work, to hide out, too, in the rabbit holes.

Almost fifteen years separate the *Lost River Series* and the *Saskatchewan Paintings*. And during that time Mackenzie has shifted back and forth between figuration and abstraction, text and colour, lightness and depth. Though the two bodies of work may seem to anchor opposite ends of the painting spectrum, they are in fact remarkably similar. With the *Saskatchewan Paintings*, Mackenzie has, in a sense, come full circle. She is back to the lush, stratified surfaces of her early work, to the layering imagery seen in, but also predating, the *Lost River* paintings. She is back to the poetic search for fictional territories – and the real ones that inspire them. She is again addressing the pressing need to recover what we've lost or have purposefully buried.

Mackenzie's art suits a time where nothing is absolute and everything is open to question. She knows well that this mix of facts and fictions we call "today" is but a temporary state, which the clear(er) light of tomorrow will replace with another provisional set of truths. And if the grounds on which she stakes her claim are shifting, well, haven't they always been? Painted boundaries and drawn borders are never quite clear, are always changing. Like faraway starts on a summer night. Like that, but not.