

# YOU ARE HERE: MAPPING LANDON MACKENZIE'S WORKS ON PAPER

By Liz Wylie

*My mind is pouring chaos*

*In nets onto the page*

– Michael Ondaatje, “the gate in his head,” *Rat Jelly*, 1973.

As a senior, nationally known, Vancouver-based artist, Landon Mackenzie has long been admired for her expansive and intense large-scale works with paint on canvas. Less widely known are her works on paper, which she produces voluminously as a tandem practice to her big paintings, often while travelling. Somewhere between jottings and finished works intended for public exhibition, these small paintings speak to the deepest level of human creativity. They function at times as glimpses into this intelligent artist's inner self or psyche.

It was Mackenzie's idea to bring these wide-ranging pieces together for exhibition, along with her works in printmaking from the 1970s and early 1980s, which date from her undergraduate years at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) and her MFA years at Concordia University in Montreal. So this exhibition charts the artist's journey on paper that runs parallel to the production of her large paintings during the last forty years. Sometimes one will see real connections among these small works on paper and Mackenzie's huge canvases, and in other cases, the two aspects of her practice run in tandem, but do not seem to have a direct relationship.

It was when Mackenzie was in her late twenties and living in Montreal, having already completed her MFA at Concordia University, that she first turned to painting. Her first

canvases to be exhibited were her *Lost River Series*, which she began in 1981 and which became an overnight sensation. After that group of evocative paintings Mackenzie continued her exploration of the notion of the North, working on several streams or strands of images at once. She moved to teach at Emily Carr College of Art and Design (now University) in Vancouver in 1986, where she began her *Canadian Shield and Target* series. Throughout the 1990s she worked on three groups of works: the *Saskatchewan Paintings* (1993-97), the *Tracking Athabaska* series (1998 to 2001), and the *Houbart's Hope* works (2001 to 2004). This latter group was created in the twenty-first century, and incorporated the artist's interest in neural mapping – the charting of brain and nerve impulses. The artist also began to combine images and motifs from historical city maps with images of the human brain. These led to her *Neurocity* series of paintings, which she began in 2007, followed by her recent large works called *Big Sky*.

While Mackenzie has made Vancouver her home for three decades now, she travels each summer to visit Stony Lake in Ontario, where she spent her childhood summers, and then to work in her Prince Edward Island studio. She has often travelled abroad and was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work for part of the year in Berlin in 2007 and 2013, and in the Canada Council Paris studio in 2009. In each of these residencies the artist focused almost entirely on works on paper, from which a strong selection are in this current exhibition.

Although this show begins with an example of juvenilia – a watercolour painted when the artist was fourteen and partially inspired by the *Eloise* books for children – followed by the artist's conceptually and process-oriented drypoint etchings from the 1970s, a fitting point of entry for this text is Mackenzie's repeated single recumbent ovoid form that she began to use in 1990, and still employs to form a compositional armature in many works on paper. This shape/device is so elementally her own, even as it has morphed recently into a more-or-less circular form. To place an oval floating in the centre of a blank sheet of paper or piece of canvas can be a handy way to anchor a composition and effectively deal formally with corners and edges of the composition's

rectangular support edge. We can think of Cubism, for example, with those artists' often-used ovoid compositions – clusters of forms and energy. It is also an intuitive ploy or starting point for Mackenzie, perhaps a way of centering herself as a work on paper is commenced, a way of directing the thoughts and focusing attention.

[catch: repro of grid of ovals images from the notebooks, we have many shot as small jpegs]

In this exhibition we first see the ovals in the watercolours painted on a road trip to Saskatchewan made in 1994, and again the following summer in small works done while Mackenzie was a workshop leader at the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop. These are landscapes, except for a group called *Man Curl* (1995). Both clusters of work seem archetypally female – there is an enclosed feeling to them, rather than the spreading and open prairie vista. Instead Mackenzie conjures and renders a contained universe, an egg, a point of origin and potential. These works are like landscapes that have been felt, rather than observed from a removed, fixed vantage point. We enter into those ovals, as though being borne inward in a boat on a waterway.

[catch: repro?]

By starting with the oval, the artist is beginning with something known, yet at the same time, it is as though she is starting from scratch or ground zero. Mackenzie conducts large amounts of research and has spent a great deal of time travelling back and forth across Canada and in and out of the Canadian wilderness. In all her series of works, this knowledge becomes a kind of internalized compost, from which she can then intuitively draw when working. The oval device allowed her to bring all this material together, the way a chef presents a meal on a plate.

As will be seen, the ovals continued and eventually changed into circular maps of cities and diagrams of the brain. In Berlin in 2007 and 2013, the ovals are more circular, and rather than elements of the natural world, starting in 2013 they contain girders and

buildings and train tracks – bits and pieces and detritus of industry and the urban environment.

Another way of interpreting the central, recumbent oval is as a conception of the self, and expanding from that, one's cosmic self, known in Hindu thought as the atman/Atman, or close enough to what we refer to in the external world as the microcosm/macrocosm. In the small incarnation rests nascent all the variety of the large, just in a compressed or reduced form. There is a resonating depth to these images. In a text from 2011 I summed up the ovals and their path this way:

An image that often appears in the artist's small watercolours that she produces almost daily, especially when travelling, is a roughly ovoid shape, usually on its side. My reading of this is as of the primal or ultimate self, like a pre-cognitive conception/rendering representing the *feeling* of being, of being alive, having a brain and mind in a body, a self. The same sort of reading works for me in looking at her recent gigantic paintings. Over the last couple of decades, Mackenzie's trajectory has changed, from at first creating something fictional, to then mapping an imagined past, to ultimately turning her gaze inward, cerebrally, in terms of neurology and the life of the brain. [Endnote reference 1]

Once the artist discovered beautifully made small Japanese artists' notebooks while visiting Japan in 1996, she was on her way to coping with the richness and solitariness of travel by painting in a small scale each evening and even into the night during a trip. The images on these pages are fresh, spontaneous, sometimes awkward, sometimes elegant, always expressive, and fascinating in their variety. They are usually single images that are at once works of art and at the same time the raw material of art. The notebooks are amazing examples of how the mind of an artist produces visual thoughts. We might recall the notion of thought-things, coined by theorist Hannah Arendt. Or for that matter, thought forms, as discussed by the Theosophists of the early twentieth century, which are derived from spiritual and/or mental discipline. Both would apply. The

artist's painting in the notebooks could be viewed as a sort of practice in which she clears her mind for the next day's encounters, gallery going, and research.

Mackenzie has had a fairly ritualistic aspect to her practice for many years. This began with her printing of each day's state of her single etching plate in the 1970s, and carried through to her working methods on her large canvases, which are layered, erased, layered again, until they reach a point of completion.

[designer please set off the following sections in some way from main text, for example, indent, font, colour]

#### Tracking Landon Mackenzie

In some ways I feel that my life has been lived on a parallel track to Landon's, a kind of pale echo to her colourful and intense trajectory. Maybe this is partly because we were born in the same year, and we have lived in and been to many of the same places, and know many of the same colleagues. At the same time, many of our activities have been widely divergent, and we have never been actual friends.

I think back to our young years to compare and contrast:

She dropped out of high school early, skipping her final year – I would never have dared.

She went to NSCAD and received a BFA in printmaking – I began in studio at York, but was not up to the psychic stress of being an artist, and swerved into art history.

We first met in 1977 when we were at Concordia University together for our MFAs, mine in Canadian art history, hers in studio. Although she'd been accepted as a printmaker, that conceptually based repetitive work she had been doing would not hold her interest for much longer (although it would always lie at the foundation of her practice), and after graduation

she began sneaking paint onto her prints, and soon began actual painting on canvas. She developed various friends and her mentors in Montreal – we all shape our own paths. Landon had such a sunny and attractive personality (an amazing smile) and was so friendly – that is my overall memory of her at Concordia. She was also such a hippy and so laid back, and made many long visits to the Yukon. In contrast, I stayed in Montreal in the summers working as a bank teller.

Maybe Landon was the artist I would have wished to become, if I'd had the nerve, which I did not. Immediately after her MFA, Mackenzie rode the crest of the wave of New Image work with her *Lost River Series*, and continued painting afterwards, deepening and broadening the areas of research and human experience that her work encompassed.

Basically, following her graduation from Concordia University, Mackenzie bravely reinvented herself as a painter, without any formal training in painting. Supported by her artist friends and studio mates in Montreal, who would hide her canvases from her when they thought they were finished so that she didn't overwork them, she forged ahead into this new territory. Just as her stance with regard to her prints at NSCAD and Concordia had been radical in rejecting producing editions, incorporating her own writing of text into her work, and exploring personal and feminist issues in this text, Mackenzie continued to find her own way. The shift from her diaristic, black-and-white drypoint etchings to luscious, large paintings that incorporated archetypal imagery drawn from deep in her unconscious was extreme. Never completely leaving behind the repeated scraping of her etching plate, however, the artist still worked in states and layers as she moved into the world of colour and strata of cultural meaning. Her Yukon sojourns fed directly into her visually luscious *Lost River* paintings in an intense way; the grip and melancholic call of that wild northerliness, the strong colours, the haunting presence of the hybrid animals struck a nerve with Canadian audiences.

Some people may have wondered how Mackenzie could go on to top the *Lost River Series*, but her *Canadian Shield and Target* works, and then her mapping trilogy were *tours de force* that set the bar even higher, incorporating feminist imagery, and in the case of the mapping works, layers and layers of images, signs, and text – the entire histories of the European brutal colonizing of the prairie, in all its cultural complexity. Who could have imagined it was possible to make paintings that encompassed all of this.

I left Montreal in 1981 and Landon stayed on. I went to live in Toronto, then Saskatoon, and later Edmonton. The next time I saw Landon was in Edmonton in 1984 when she came to teach a spring session at the University of Alberta. She already had her first child (Cluny, born in 1983), who crawled all around my living room when Landon came over for a visit. My first child would be born the following year. Baby Cluny was feeling a bit under the weather, lucky for me, said Landon, or he would have destroyed my place. The students studying with her that spring at the University of Alberta were ecstatic and like caged wild animals suddenly set free – to paint images from their dreams, for example. They had been used to a steady diet of recipe-method painting, all baked at 350 degrees [to quote from a bit of actual anonymous student graffiti on a typed painting assignment stuck on the wall I saw once while teaching art history there]. Landon was working on an enormous painting called *Winter 1984 (Alberta)* in a studio space at the University and I went to see it in progress. I was deeply impressed by its massive scale and its depth of content.

In 1986, she moved from Montreal/Toronto to Vancouver and I moved from Edmonton to Toronto. These criss-crossing lines themselves form a kind of map, two lives and careers moving along on their individual trajectories, but once in a while running parallel, and at various times meeting. I saw her in Toronto when she came for her two solo shows with

Wynick/Tuck Gallery, both of which I reviewed, the first in *NOW* magazine in 1987, and the second for *C magazine* in 1991.

I saw Landon again when she came to Toronto in 1997 for her solo show at the Art Gallery of York University, and then again at her exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in North York in 2001. My regard for her practice continued to deepen and I was continually peripherally aware of the growth and vision of her work.

I wanted to include her in my thematic show called *In the Wilds: Canoeing and Canadian Art*, which I organized for the McMichael in 1998. She made sure we obtained the loan of her archetypal *Canoe/Woman* painting from a private collection. She visited Toronto during the run of the show and agreed to meet with the docents from the gallery where I was working at the University of Toronto, who came up for a tour. They all loved her – her enthusiasm and candor, and her irreverence – as she explained to them about the critical reception of her *Canoe and Target* series – “first the boys told me I couldn’t paint, then the girls told me I couldn’t paint!”

[reproduce Canoe/Woman?]

During the 1990s Mackenzie’s works on paper were small, most often in her notebooks, and completed while travelling. During a period where she was dealing with health issues, from 2001 to 2004, the artist worked mostly in her home studio on small scale paintings she called *Neurotransmitter*, and produced copious works on paper, many along the theme of mapping, including neural mapping. She became interested in historical maps of cities and how the transportation routes in and out of cities – rivers, railways, highways – looked like the arteries feeding the brain. This research and work fed directly into the artist’s *Houbar’s Hope* paintings (finished in 2004) and her *Neurocity* paintings, which she began in 2007. Once her children were older she had the freedom to go to work and travel abroad. Beginning with a sabbatical spent in Berlin in



2007, her central oval became more circular and her imagery industrial. Being in Berlin, she said, was like living without language. The imagery in her works on paper created in Berlin was of networks, tangles – maps gone awry.

I moved to Kelowna in 2007, and Landon and I talked on the phone about working together, now that I was close. I asked her what she thought would be appropriate and she had this idea of works on paper survey. We met in Vancouver several times, and in the meantime, I included her in my *The Point Is* group exhibition, for which she came to give a public talk in the fall of 2011. There was actually a glowing half life of Landon's energy in the Okanagan when I got here that several artists mentioned to me, as she had been invited to visit and speak in 1988 at Okanagan University College. Okanagan-based artist Wanda Lock said that the students were seated waiting for Landon to arrive, and were passing around the Fall 1988 issue of *Canadian Art* magazine with Attila Richard Lukacs on the cover. "I remember thinking, yay, he's alright, and then Landon's talk started and my painting world changed forever ..." [endnote ref 2] Lock was inspired by Landon, and realized for the first time that it could work to be a woman and an artist and to have all aspects of both of those identities combine fully. These were not mutually exclusive as she had previously thought.

In 2009 Mackenzie was awarded the Canada Council Paris studio and spent the fall there, working solely on works on paper, mainly about city/brain maps. At the end of her time there she mounted a studio show she called the *Map Room*.

In 2013 she was awarded a residency in Berlin at a complex called ZK/U, a former warehouse depot located beside a large railway yard. Due to the industrial nature of the elements on view from her windows, her subject changed from maps to industrial elements – scaffolds, nets, girders, railway tracks, many depicted at night. Mackenzie created wonderful run of works on paper with a tremendous expansive energy, some of

them abstract, without even minimal reference to the visible world. They are often a bit gritty and grotty in tone, and were worked in a combination of ink, gouache, and watercolour, with the paper sheets often gessoed first.

As is the case with her large paintings, Mackenzie's works on paper in general are satisfyingly complex, and do not lend themselves to single readings. As Vancouver writer Glen Lowry noted "The duality of landscape as signified and signifier, as place and painting, provides an important hinge in Mackenzie's work." [endnote ref 3] When we look at her works, whether on canvas or paper, we travel in and around in them, they are not single images to be taken in quickly. It becomes a journey for the viewer, and one picks up meaning as one goes. This is individual: there is no one route, no single meaning. Layers is not really the right word, perhaps multivalent would be more accurate. Many levels of the artist's consciousness are evident and present in her pieces, including aspects of her unconscious.

Interestingly, while Mackenzie loves art and visiting art museums, her paintings on canvas or paper are not about art *per se*, they are not self-conscious ruminations on the state of painting. They are about our lived lives, the body, places, histories, voices. They are almost paintings in name only. Yet, that being said, they are beautiful works.

I had begun by using the working title of *Journeys* in mind for this show, but Landon quietly changed it to *Parallel Journeys*, meaning, I think, parallel to her paintings, for the works on paper and the paintings are not the same path. The paper works are quicker reads because they are smaller and some are really dashed off, so looking at them is like nibbling on tapas compared to eating a big plated meal.

In September of 2012 I arranged to visit Calgary at the time of Landon's twenty-year survey show at the Esker Foundation's brand new gallery space. Landon's show was their first artist's solo exhibition. The space is stunning and her large paintings looked so great in the rooms.

When I visited Landon's studio in the spring of 2014 to work on selecting works for this exhibition, she had been waylaid by all the thinking and work in connection with an invitation from the Vancouver Art Gallery to show her work in tandem with paintings by Emily Carr. She had detailed plans of the VAG's gallery space enlarged and taped up on the wall, with tiny photocopies of painting images stuck in position. So we ended up talking a lot about Emily Carr, musing over her life and her posthumous reputation. Not one to accept a pre-digested version of Carr, Mackenzie had researched her in depth. The show opened in September of 2014 and I went for the opening day and found it very moving, a wonderful gallery experience. Who else would have the nerve to fake up his or her own painting of Carr's pet monkey Woo in her yellow dress because the VAG was not granted the loan of this work for the show. The echoes between the two artists' paintings were like depth charges, powerful and sonorous. All of Mackenzie's ideas in her work have had this intensity for me, they are not just ideas in the cerebral sense, but carry a rich and layered emotional and psychological freight.

Mackenzie's strengths as an artist are her inventive energy, her intellectual restlessness and curiosity, her love of imagery, maps, language, and history, and her determination to keep working in the face of frowning would-be authority figures. She is able to harness her mind, emotion, body and spirit to have all systems working in tandem and firing with precision and grace. Her work is embodied, informed, poetic, expressive, and completely her own. Even though her art is not generally about recognizable landscape anymore, much of it is still about mapping, about where we are in the world, and where we find ourselves in our lives. Bruce Springsteen once said: I think that is what film and art and music do; they can work as a map of sorts for your feelings.

Endnotes

1. Liz Wylie, *The Point Is*. Kelowna: Kelowna Art Gallery, 2011, p. 21.

2. Wanda Lock, email to the author, April 1, 2015.

3. Glen Lowry, "Nervous Centres: Landon Mackenzie's Paintings and Drawings, 1993-2012," in *Landon Mackenzie: Nervous Centre*. Calgary: Esker Foundation, 2012, p. 6.

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