

Landon

Mackenzie

The Impact of Gender Studies Across the Disciplines, excerpt from the Introduction (page 14 / 15) by Pamela McCallum and Lorraine Radtke, **Annual Index, Resources for Feminist Research**, Vol. 29 Nos. 1 / 2, Winter 2001 / 02,

Perhaps no contribution to this issue foregrounds feminist breakthroughs in the conceptualization of knowledge quite so much as that of Landon Mackenzie. As a visual artist, Mackenzie challenges viewers to think through the colours and textures of paint and canvas. In an essay accompanying a 1997 exhibition of her paintings, Jack Laing describes the complex interactions of human subjectivity and inhabited space that Mackenzie's art explores: her project, he suggests, is "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" (Laing, p. 18). And yet, Mackenzie is not only concerned with making visible what has been obscured and unrecognized, but also in exploring the processes through which erasure takes place. Laing describes a paradox at the centre of her artistic practice: "[I]n effort to shed light on these silent stories, her paintings actually conceal more than they reveal" (p. 18). Heavy layering of paint, partially unintelligible writing, gaps in figuration, spaces of startlingly impenetrable blackness—all of these techniques work to challenge the viewer, to frustrate any transparent interpretation of the paintings.

These qualities are nowhere so apparent as in the Saskatchewan Paintings. As a province, Saskatchewan is a particularly apt subject for Mackenzie: its boundaries are not marked by nature (rivers or mountains), but simply by human imposition, by the grid of latitude and longitude; it is the province of vast open spaces, low horizons and huge skies, deceptively empty; it is a place she visits, sitting in small town coffee shops to write, or gazing down at old documents in the provincial archives. "Gabriel's Crossing to Humbolt" (1995) confronts the viewer with an expansive canvas, more than seven feet high and ten feet long. Working with canvases this size is undoubtedly reminiscent of the vast spaces of Saskatchewan, but it is also Mackenzie's claim to situate herself within the generally masculine tradition of large oil paintings. Outlines of a rigid grid cover the painting's surface, foregrounded as intensely bright yellow squares near the centre, faintly visible in some places, painted over into obscurity in others. A column of neat handwriting extends through the centre of the picture plane; the words, however, are difficult to read, layered over each other, so that only fragments are legible: "It seems a chance meeting..." or "beyond real space." In looking at the painting, therefore, the viewer is challenged just as much to reflect on what is not decipherable, on what is not there. As Mackenzie puts it, "The words hidden over. Secrets kept forever in casing of water and polymer. Retrievable only perhaps by archival X-Ray" (Mackenzie, p. 8).

The paradox of a "present absence" is especially striking in two black clover or quatrefoil shapes that seem to open up on each side of the grid lines. The disappearance of the painting's colour and patternings into such intense blackness figures all that vanishes into landscape, into history, into memory. The title of the painting, "Gabriel's Crossing to Humbolt," refers to the ferry which Gabriel Dumont operated; that is, it suggests the daily work and routines of his life that have subsequently been displaced by his association with Louis Riel and the Métis Rebellion, which now positions him in the official knowledges of Canadian history. Similar questions and issues are raised in the fictional territories of Mackenzie's 1996 acrylic on linen painting, "Interior Lowlands (Still the Restless Whispers Never Leave Me)." Here, netlike lines create a less obvious but no less insistent grid, whose straight lines and angles contrast with the meandering lines of what appears to be the mapping of a river. Unlike the clarity and directional orientation of a map, however, "Interior Lowlands" offers some points of reference—"Saskatoon," "Battle Plain"—only to dissolve into the obscurity of layered and shadowed, ultimately indecipherable, script. Alongside writing and discourse are traces of the human body: the round womb-like dark shape, the bright red paint which resembles nothing quite so much as dripping blood. The thick, layered

palimpsest of the painting's surface suggests the complexities and difficulties in interpreting the past and retrieving history, in understanding landscape and the markings of space on human bodies, in apprehending and recognizing a self or selves.