

Landon

Mackenzie

Landon Claims and the Saskatchewan of the Mind, by Charlotte Townsend-Gault
Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, 1996

—READING—

Looking at these vast, dark paintings spattered with stars, gleams and what could be the lights on radio towers, all partially veiled with milky vapours, viewing habits might suggest the night sky, and habits of reading recall Keats' lines: "And when I see upon the night's starred face/Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance." But it is unlikely that paintings made now in Canada by a woman would be representations of this kind. And why should all this dark paint signify the darkness of night? They instantly raise questions about how they should be read. Landon Mackenzie has taken literally the idea that the image is a text and makes it very obvious. There is 'writing', linear words, all over the painted surface, and beneath it. It is often hard to read, but not always. It is not clear whether the emphasis is on what we can get or what we can't. Even if they are intended as allegories of reading, it does nothing to discourage speculation as to what these traces of expansive even frantic, activity mean. All four paintings contrive to be at once highly activated and to have great passages of calm and silence. The immense 'black holes,' that punch through everything else on the canvases, could be hurtling towards the viewer, or they could just be gaps in the picture.

At the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in the early 1970s, Mackenzie was exposed to labour intensive processes of art-making which were apparently cool, but perhaps obsessive, declaring everything, but perhaps hiding everything. This is a conclusion that might be reached if a connection is made to the 'writing' of *Les automatistes* to which she was introduced by Guido Molinari at graduate school in Montreal. At Concordia also there was Irene Whittome's emphasis on ritual material practice, some clues for Mackenzie on the sheer *difficulty* of being a female artist, and Molinari's encouraging insistence that she *paint*, advice that for a long time she resisted. Since those days she has studied with Griselda Pollock, with whose ideas "I am often *struggling* to agree," but who introduced her to themes from Gyatri Spivak, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and bell hooks. She has also learned cautiously from Mary Kelly, and from fragments of Derrida's notion of *l'écriture*. All this, much of it picked up in conversation, is layered into her thinking with elements prefigured in her earlier work. The process, not one of blending components into a resolved whole but wrestling with them, is mimicked in the construction of the works whereby historical texts about the Prairie territory and her struggles to unravel them are layered in. By Susan Stewart's account such work would be an extension of the crimes of writing, which has given the 20th century avant garde permission innumerable times to use 'writing,' often illegible, for its own ends. Mackenzie's magpie intelligence finds that theory both illumines and 'can shut you down.' In a sense her paintings are like commonplace books, noting emotions and passages of phrases, historical and contemporary, that have caught her attention—a sort of auto-bibliography. All of this contributes to but does not fully account for what makes them worth looking at.

Such a history makes her paintings instructively different, of course, from other vast, mostly dark paintings which in a way they resemble. Ad Reinhardt's—not to be scanned for they simply yield unified paintings to deliver an awed frisson. A 'reading' of 'pictures' has become permissible, or their own deconstruction may be painted into the work, repression and displacement can be key, and hidden depths something other than risible. Like other women who have been making paintings, or using painting in their work, in such a climate, in Canada, since the early 1980s, Joanne Tod, Mary Scott, Shirley Wiitasalo amongst them, Mackenzie positions herself *vis a vis* paint, and paints her engagement with the problems of reading. It is inseparable from her frustrated rumination on the absence of a space for women to paint what matters to them without using patriarchal paradigms, mostly oppressive. What she must grapple with is whether she is painting the predicament, the frustration, or painting her way out of it.

—ON THE FLOOR—

Mackenzie starts with the large canvas on the floor; but before you can say “Pollock” you know it is Griselda not Jackson. From the former she learned that there is no easy space for a woman to ‘paint’ her body, (even though she has photographs of one of her young daughters artlessly applying paint to her face, torso and limbs). She turned to ‘writing’ her body, painting the writing with her body, the hand with the brush or tube recording the body’s somatic language. At first she pads all over it in socked feet (at 7’6” x 10’3” the canvases are “big enough to get lost in”). Once the painting has been stretched she works from a wooden contraption, with widely spaced wheels, on which she can traverse the canvas a few inches above it. After the canvas has undergone an intimate, inverted archeology, and been transformed several times, she continues to work on it vertically “to resolve the ending.”

Her archeology of personal knowledge can be glimpsed in, for example, *If I Loved a Cowboy...Leaving her Fingerprints All Over Everything She Does*. Three black holes hang on the diagonal from lower left to upper right, or the other way round, as a fall or a climb or, if it’s in perspective, flat. From a distance it looks as though they were there on the canvas first; up close, perhaps as if they came later, darkening the calligraphy that runs across and across without beginning or end. The most visible rabbit is in the centre foreground, somewhere in a stratosphere, which is looped with concentric rings of fingerprints. There is another diagonal, of rabbits, top left to lower right, or the reverse, many rabbit ears emerging from the gloom. More of her fingerprints break away from the black hole on which they seemed to be centred, into a diaspora, fading away, turning blue, then glowing turquoise, pink, citron, phosphorescent violet, enlarged and separated from any discernible pattern. The rest of the painted field is activated by being part matte, part gloss; some areas are brightly lit from some underlying glowing flux, others murky, in places layers in relief, in others there’s nothing there. The black holes, the voids, are the most assertive components.

—SASKATCHEWAN—

Inevitably such a formal account is misleading. These paintings, and this one is typical, present themselves rather as dense force fields, palimpsests of many partly discernible things, partly legible cursive writing, the odd word—“Saskatchewan (twice), 40 acre...too sociological...40 acres”—and stories she is willing to share. Although she has lived in several other parts of Canada, Saskatchewan is a place she has taught herself about rather than lived in, which she visits to be anonymous and write in Prairie cafes; to brood over some unforgettable memory, a transformative moment, somebody’s studio seen from the black streets; to pore over old maps in the provincial archives until she knows the old trails like the back of her hand; to identify with the so called Riel Rebellion; to grasp its specific history and to see it as emblematic of Canada, for the maps speak of obliteration, takeover and gridlock. In at least one of the paintings, *Gabriel’s Crossing to Humboldt*, a grid underlies the field. It is cause of both pride and anxiety that her great uncle, George Douglas, was an explorer of the Coppermine River, and, in 1911, made a legendary voyage north with canoe and box camera from Edmonton along the Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie Rivers to the point where the Coppermine flows into the Arctic Ocean.

Thus Mackenzie willingly deconstructs her paintings. Several times I was reminded of Jeff Wall. Although his pictures take on representation with a clarity that seems the obverse of Mackenzie, his pictures are also filled with their own pedagogy which he is willing to talk about. But then when he stops talking, or you are left alone, these instructions for viewing settle into the incoherent spaces that have somehow opened up and confirm or dispute with what you have somehow been told. And after some private dialectic you can end up somewhere quite different, perhaps even flouting the instructions. The point of this comparison is that first you need the reader’s guide. And you also need to know where you are. Wall and Mackenzie read differently outside Canada. A basic Bourdieu point, but it does change the script.

—READER’S GUIDE—

Intercalated amongst the traces of words and shadows of images there is a conglomeration of urgent musings that direct her work and, once you know, can be uncovered in it:

Painting—whether to, and what;
What kind of a subject is the female body, her eroticism and her
crises?
Writing the body/writing on painting;

Wild secret desires vs domestic and emotional security;
Risk of bathos re the above;
Canada, its mythologies and imaginaries;
The need to unravel personally the fact and fictions of the
colonialist assault on native populations;
Maps and map-making—an activity both absolute and proximate;
Landscape painting a kind of mapping?
The analogy between land and body, both mapped and
systematized by invaders;
Saskatchewan, 'the Prairie,' its histories, maps—a real place and
an allegory;
The construction of Regina, aka "The creek before where the
bones lie;"
The interminable struggle to loose the social bonds and disappear
into some 'Saskatchewan' of the mind...

Any attempt to focus on one of these items is belied by the sheer multifariousness of the work and the familiar muddy waters of polysemy. One of the interesting questions about representation raised by work like Mackenzie's is the extent to which the decipherables—fragments of a map, rabbits, a hanged man—direct you to read the 'meaning' of the paintings as a whole. The alternative is that, along with the indecipherables, they add up to a picture of the processes of making, and accompanying emotional, intellectual and physical processes. I would suggest that both possibilities are at work. These are, in other words, about themselves, self-reflexive paintings. But they also reach out clearly enough into the discourse where they can be understood as claiming a space for painting, including 'landscape.' How do they do this?

They persist in problematising a position that has still not gone away (as Mackenzie puts it, now that sex, romantic love, bodily crises have been named and up-dated "nobody gives a damn because it's only ever women's stuff") by problematising their own reading. But why, in post-Kelly days, concede so much to the most mealy mouthings of the worldwide Boys' Club? or the Preston Mannings of the world? And what of the risk of perpetuating the reading of woman as "irrevocably immersed in flux and language-less," as Carol Laing put it in her mapping of the woman and painting debate in the late 1980s; and isn't the land/body analogy now too corny to be considered? Mackenzie's defenses are the well-rehearsed discursive struggles, and the hope that a painting can be more than the sum of its, theoretical, parts. This is a risk because there is a tendency among those who do the serious authenticating to see such a position as anachronistic folly, a return to the point at which theory became a necessity. Mackenzie must hold her own even though it is indeed irritating that transgression has its own syntax, its own canon. Her engagement with a world way beyond the framing edge is marked by her attempted defiance within it.

—LANDON'S CLAIM—

If this is more or less how it goes it means that, from amongst the various claims she makes, the most significant is the one that says her work is about claiming a space, occupying it and then showing what she did with it. An anthropologist friend introduced her to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*—a space, both actual and metaphorical, where the body moves around and is identified as a social person. She wants to paint a "home space" as free, as necessary to occupy and as much her own as the actual studio space she goes to when she leaves home to be an artist, a social role. In this role she is trying to record the hidden and the forbidden in a rebellion against the society's controlling text. The paintings are interventions into her own life as much as into any discourse. Riel and Gabriel Dumont are among the heroes here, along with the many lost voices, in their efforts to un-make the encroaching map of Canada.

—BLACK HOLES—

For all this guidance through the paintings, the eye is constantly being foiled and the mind frustrated, the writing has no beginning and no end, the imagery is opaque, the gaps in the painting glare. In the story that she tells about herself there are gaps, absences, the yearning for the Saskatchewan of the mind. When it comes down to it, everything in the reading guide is a struggle. It is at this point that the black holes swim into focus, as clues.

Mackenzie's work is part disclosure—the reading guide giving enough away to prevent bewilderment. But part of its fascination is the withholding, the space for doubt and undisclosed secrets. This in itself is a recognized feminist strategy—think of Barbara Kruger, but think also of Luce Irigaray who said it shouldn't be. Mackenzie equivocates: you can get a lot of it, but you can't see it all, you can't read it all, you can't get it all. Just as the most finely honed explanatory theory finally lapses, these pictures do not fully explain themselves. The black holes prevail. This is one viewer's way of locating some 'problem' that lies hinted at in the artist's central claim for her work—that it is a struggle for 'space.' The search for a 'space' extends as far as 'Saskatchewan'—a dark hole into which to disappear.

In related developments, it seems that recent neuroanatomical research is leading to a greater appreciation for the perspective of the body. Based on the study of the relationship between emotion and reason, an up-dated account of the human self pictures the self as distributed throughout the body, not as located in the mind and overseeing the body from some central observation post. A critique of Descartes, the idea that he must have been wrong about the mind/body distinction, is implied by many of those whose ideas have contributed to Mackenzie's own position. But in a sense the Cartesian formulation is reinforced by their work inasmuch as it demonstrates the consequences of the ways in which Cartesian dualism has underscored the idea of gendered difference and a separable female sphere. One of the results is that it leaves a receptive artist like Mackenzie floundering around in the reinforced picture of patriarchal domination, even while they, and she, know that it is wrong. Wrong, that is, not in the sense of being unjust, although it is that, but inaccurate. So the Saskatchewan of the mind may turn out to be the body. And the reconciliation between mental and physical states might close up the black holes.

These works then are not passive picturings of a predicament, more autobiographical odyssey through a combat zone, theoretical and otherwise. Those who come after can try to piece together what happened from the scars, traces and fragments, or, as I have done, speculate on what they yearn for. Finally, even though it seems very difficult to settle whether or not such pleasure is allowed, they set up a lovely bio-rhythm, thwarting and yielding, and other words like that.