

Landon

Mackenzie

Yvonne Lammerich finds Canadian history alive and erupting through the surfaces of **Landon Mackenzie's *Tracking Athabasca***
Canadian Art Spring 2001

Athabasca straddles the northern extremities of the border dividing Saskatchewan and Alberta. Its name is synonymous with the old North West, with trappers, uranium and folklore. "Tracking Athabasca" is the collective title of Landon Mackenzie's four large, low-hung and grandly panoramic paintings at Montreal's Espace 502. In these magnificently imagined works, Mackenzie brings into focus the twin foundations that have threaded their way through her painting practice, and which mark her historic moment. The first of these is Canada, or rather, the Canada that was — a colonial nation of histories and mythologies, of half-forgotten stories at the far edge of Empire. The other is Landon Mackenzie herself, embodied in the land, in the sky at night, in the splash of an oar, in the correctness of a mid-century Toronto afternoon tea. And running through these twin rivers, a deep and electrifying eroticism.

Tracking Athabasca, 1998-2000. The title is cinematic, and just as screen credits open up onto the here and now of another place and another time, the works immediately place the viewer on the move, like a geologist, like a trapper, like a bloodhound, or like a lover. When standing in front of these four paintings, the viewer's experience of them becomes peripheral to the confrontation with a scale larger than immediate vision. There is more to touch than is possible to reach.

The Athabasca works are an elaboration on a suite of paintings made between 1993 and 1997 titled *Saskatchewan* paintings. Mackenzie's archival research of the region has contributed a wealth of visual material on the subject. She includes early and recent maps, documents on the fur trade, commercial charters, railway promotions and personal war records. During this time her paintings came progressively to embody a complex re-reading of Canada's colonial histories informed by feminist, postmodernist and post-colonial theories. As a consequence, the paintings' formal and densely narrative texts have become overwritten—complicated palimpsests of data. Also as a consequence, the paintings are not ideologically conceived, but are instead about laying bare evidence to which the viewer becomes witness. For example, in a large painting from 1994, *If I Loved a Cowboy.../Leaving Her Fingerprints all Over Everything She Does*, the viewer is confronted by three large dark oval shapes situated in a glowing field of warm yellows, oranges and reds. These ovals appear burnt out, as though by the heat from filaments of text and mythic centres a spray of pearls—like semen—erupts as a string of memories—the wealth that the trappers and surveyors left behind.

Pearls, semen and memory: Mackenzie's paintings are inseminated with tiles and stories, and with painterly inventions. And old Dog-Rib man speaks his vision of this vast country by remarking that if the white man's Heaven isn't similar he doesn't want any part of it. He'd rather have the stillness of feeling and being, the wind, the infinite expanse, the profusion of flowers, skies of summer blue and frozen lakes, caribou and great fat white fish.

From first encounter, the *Athabasca* paintings fulfil this promise and much more. The embrace that invites the viewer is not that of an idealized vision, but rather a voluptuous generosity in the paintings' complex visual field that permits the viewer, through re-enactment, through "tracking," to come upon loaded incidents encrusted in the paintings' surfaces. Through a play of disguise and disclosure, these revelations tear and finally dissolve the great Canadian master narrative of natural order. And they do so through facts. Facts that are found, for example, in the *Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department by George Simpson, 1820-1821, and Report*, which records the making of charters, the holding of councils, the conferring of grants and rights and the blazing of trails across a beaver-pelt land sometimes vaguely referred to as Saskatchewan Country. Notably absent from these records

are the disenfranchised voices of the Native inhabitants and other colonial minority groups. Mackenzie's vision is to reinsert these voices into the records—into the landscape—through the pictorial means of painting. This echoes like the taut, emotive pleas in the last three lines of one of Mackenzie's poems:

*aching still
for a real touch
to give me equilibrium*

Mackenzie's methodology of constructing equilibrium through the material presence of her surfaces has benefited from, but should not be confused with, the expressionists' appeal to the presence of action. Nor is the atmospheric layering of her work related to the sublime in post-painterly abstraction, or to the underlying, recurring presence of the grid in modernist practice. Rather, Mackenzie shatters these paradigms by ruthlessly insisting on their coexistence—not in a tradition of painterliness, but in an act of encrustation. It is clear she recognizes that the complexity of her subject, of her stories, requires an equally complex glue to hold it together. These mapping elements weave in and out of the paintings as drips, lines, scratches, pools. The coordinates are words; the intersections, numbers possessing topographical or geological specificity. But they are not literal maps, nor literary stories. Neither are they clearly layered; instead they form part of a molten crust that is reconfigured with every episodic shift, filled with humour and tragedy, full of illusion and reality, a constant synthesis of different levels of perception and meaning manipulating space and image.

In *Tracking Athabasca "Winter Road, Diamond Mines,"* an expanse of white snowfields or old soiled colonial riding coats is spread out and folded, compulsively gridded. Circular irrigational grooves are covered in snow, small trees, flowers, river lines, large dirty thumbprints, doilies from Britain or France, numbers, a few words—from macro to micro, no up and no down, free falling, free tracking. Every incident has an infinite number of associations with Canada, both now and then. Suddenly a loud crack from the crust of ice on a lake: spoors of deep red paint, visible only after careful scrutiny, speak to the cost to Native peoples, to the animals of the land, to the immigrant minorities.

Crust: the hard brown surface of a loaf; any external covering and coating—for instance, a crust of snow; or geologically, the outer layer of the earth, about 35 kilometres deep; a mantle, a scab. It is through the cracks that we see the things we want to see, the things that somehow we long to see, the heat of molten passion beneath the porous crust. Mackenzie's *Tracking Athabasca* is an encrustation whose subject is the body in the land, the figured in the landscape.