Allan Harding MacKay: Memorial Project
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Allan Harding MacKay recently designed the newest "war" memorial for the City of Toronto. It was unveiled on September 17th, 2006, the 100th anniversary of the 1st day of the legislature. The unveiling was a momentous celebration involving the largest military parade that the city had seen in generations. Unlike many of the war memorials that are celebrations of the "glory of the ultimate sacrifice" this memorial was not intended to celebrate war, but rather to acknowledge those who served in the Canadian Armed Forces from the beginning of Confederation to present day Afghanistan.

Allan Harding MacKay is one of Canada's best known and most accomplished and innovative contemporary artists. As well as having a prestigious career as an arts administrator (including Director of the Power Plant, the Mendel Art Gallery, Southern Alberta Art Gallery and current Curatorial Consultant at the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery.) MacKay has had a long and successful career as a practicing artist and served twice as Canada's Official War Artist — making him an incredibly appropriate choice for such a commission.

In 1993 MacKay was contracted as an artist by the Canadian Department of National Defense to document artistically the Canadian peacekeeping activities in Somalia. The work which MacKay created as a result of that experience became known as the Somalia Yellow Series and consists of award winning videos, drawings, paintings, collages and prints which have been exhibited in and acquired by prestigious museums such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian War Museum and the University of Lethbridge. Additional projects from this series include a touring theatre collaboration with the One Yellow Rabbit Performance ensemble that staged Somalia Yellow in Calgary, Prague and Glasgow in 2002. And in 1996 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired a documentary (directed by Richard Wright) on MacKay's Somalia experience titled Changing Perspectives. In July 2002 MacKay was invited to participate in a pilot project of the Canadian Forces Artist Programme as a war artist with Operation Apollo in Afghanistan. It is from these experiences that he drew upon, and that inspired him, in the creation of the memorial.

The memorial itself is a long black granite wall, which has been sensitively integrated within the landscape of the Ontario Legislature. The wall contains pictures, images of war that MacKay found within the collections of the War Museum, Glenbow Museum and the National Archives. It literally sorted through thousands of them before making his final selection. The images were engraved onto the granite. They show battle scenes and marches but also include non-typical imagery such as a solitary soldier who holds a small child in his arms as they both look somberly through a window. In short, it is not only a comprehensive historic overview of wars in which Canadians have been involved with, but also a comprehensive overview of the minuatae and day-to-day experiences that these soldiers lived through. The images chosen also allow for a sense of universality, of representing the experiences of many, of personalizing the connection between viewer and the "unknown" soldier.

The ends of the structure are covered in bronze onto which are engraved the supporting documentary texts, acknowledgements and lists of the conflicts in which Canadians were involved thus providing a framing device for the imagery. On the centre of the monument is another bronze insert, this includes a poetic text created by author Jane Urquhart specifically for this work.

Directly behind this bronze text panel stands a centuries old red maple tree that stands guard behind this monument.

Allan Harding MacKay, War memorial, Toronto
September 17th, 2006

Virginia EICHHORN is curator at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery in Waterloo. She sits on the board of Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts. She lives in Kitchener, ON with her husband and three sons, who she hopes never have to go to war.