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Allan Harding MacKay / Erika Rothenberg / Cathy Daley / Jenny Holzer

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Allan Harding MacKay / Erika Rothenberg Cathy Daley / Jenny Holzer



Allan Harding MacKay, *98% of Women Murdered Are By Men*, 1989. Wax, oil, demar varnish on wood; 18 x 18 in

Allan Harding MacKay, Grunwald Gallery, Toronto : November, 1989 –

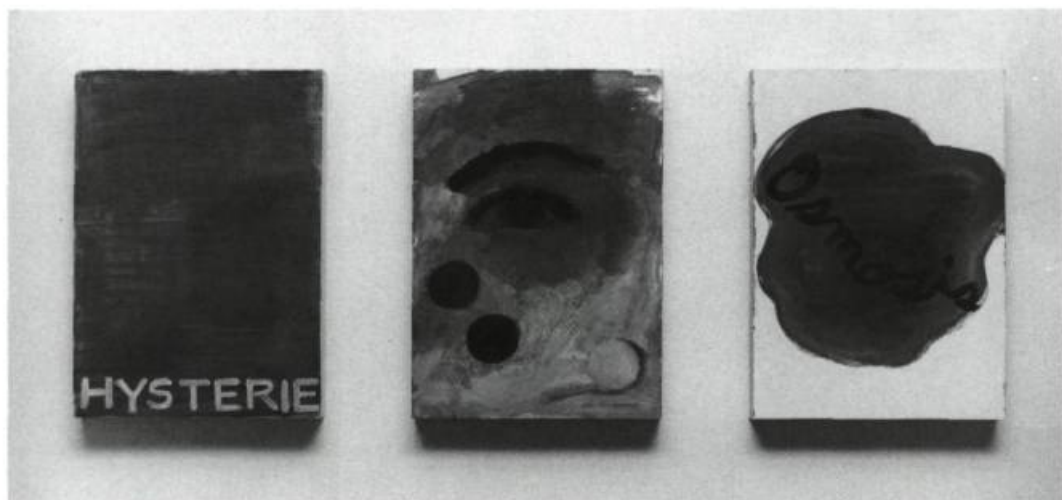
*"I think we ought to read only the kind
of books that wound and stab us".*

Franz Kafka

Allan MacKay's modestly-sized painting on wood was not officially included in his exhibition at Grunwald Gallery, but its provocative use of text raises questions about this once avant-garde tactic - the invasion of language into pictorial space, which has become commonplace in contemporary art. Less formal than the major works exhibited, it is not quite a painting, but more than a "sketch". An outline of a cat rendered on a wax ground follows the demented domestic images that MacKay has produced in the past few years. This cat, if nothing else, is a sign of the banal and the domestic. There is no sense of urgency, nature

threatened or the symbolic. MacKay's handling of this work is painterly and seductive, but it is the caption that saves it from being merely charming. *98% of women murdered are by men* was taken from one of the many statistical "facts" that appear in the media, serving as a type of "believe it or not" and catering to our need for socialized empirical information. MacKay's use of it is not a factual restatement. Its hand-inscribed lettering avoids a rhetorical reading, but it does take on an ironic and tragic tone. By coincidence, 98%... "appeared" at the time of the November massacre at the École Polytechnic in Montreal. While the work preceded this event chronologically, the proof already existed, functioning as a kind of premonition. MacKay resisted further illustration and any engagement in a cheap emotional play. (The "fact", as MacKay presents it, raises questions about the "other 2%" and all possible gender-murder combinations, but they may lead no closer to a truth.)

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Cathy Daley, *Life Stories* (detail) 1990. Oil on paper; 30 x 21 cm each. Photo : Peter MacCallum

**Erika Rothenberg, *America, The Perfect Country*,
P.P.O.W., New York, January 1990 –**

Erika Rothenberg's exhibition, *America, The Perfect Country* (P.P.O.W. New York, Jan. 1990), followed a similar strategy in the use of statistics as pictorial information. The difference between her work and MacKay's lies in a rhetorical and indiscriminate use of statistic-facts to challenge the moral state of American society. "74% of American women like money more than sex", "25% of male teenagers think that a girl owes a boy sex if he pays for dinner." Rothenberg falls short in her moralizing and critical posture. Her failure to understand how this can be translated into a visual equation is a dramatic weakness. Her work neither illuminates nor explains what is already known. MacKay, on the other hand, establishes that things are not right through a hand-made gesture, without moralizing.

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**Cathy Daley, Cold City Gallery,
Toronto : January 1990 –**

Cathy Daley's *Life Stories* is a serial installation of 65 small-scale painted sketches. Installed as a series of images preceded by a text panel-painting, the sketches are not so much fragmented notations leading to a narrative revelation as signs of emotional dilemmas — "Romantic love", "Human Nature", "Common Sense", "Hysterie". The grandeur of profound angst that leads to a high moral position is absent. These are stories that television cannot tell us. Daley's images, tentative, cropped and elusive, provide the viewer with room to

speculate, interpret and explore. Rothenberg would have us stop believing in America ... but I can't remember when I started. To paraphrase another of MacKay's works, "opinion is a cat's ass".

...

**Jenny Holzer, Guggenheim Museum,
New York : December 12 — February 11, 1990 –**

Jenny Holzer's meditations and truisms, which she has pursued with an almost evangelical fervour for the past ten years, show, on the surface, quite a distinct concern with art-language. But Holzer's private thoughts (as private as those of MacKay and Daley) are expressed through overt public transmission systems. Her messages, delivered without the benefit of images, make it difficult to positively identify authorship or emotional state.

Holzer, by working simultaneously at opposite ends of the media evolutionary scale, does present reconstructible emotions — tension from the hyperactivity of electronics and solemnity from the commandment carved in stone — a place to read and a place to rest.

The fundamental and obvious distinction in Holzer's exhibition was the condition of site, and in this case, the eccentricity of the Guggenheim Museum. She met the "ultimate museum challenge" by paring the exhibition to three distinct components — two bench installations (one forming a circle on the



Jenny Holzer, Installation view, 1990. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Photo : David Heald

main floor and the other a multi-bench display in the Guggenheim's only "conventional" space), and a 535' L.E.D. electronic sign that followed the parapet edge of the Guggenheim's ramp. This sign served as the transmission medium for a "retrospective" of her now-familiar writing style, my "favourite" being "Change is the basis of history".

I suspect that it was not her intent to challenge the architecture, but simply to articulate her concerns within the given space. Nonetheless, the installation did reveal site conditions in an indirect manner: the peculiar keyhole door leading to the Museum's dining room, and the original torpedo-shaped light fixtures that had been painted so many times they resembled the work of Bertrand Lavier. What is normally an arduous climb up the Guggenheim ramp seemed effortless, almost a pleasure, as the gaze was directed to the impressive space in the centre of the Museum and thus to the electronic sign itself. Although Holzer's work holds little pictorial pleasure, the scale of the work and its sympathy with the contours of the building invoked

a poetic mood, not through content, but through the state of abstraction of text, its speed, and the resulting intervals.

A concurrent exhibition by Russian/Soviet artist Ilya Kabakov (Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York) was, in contrast, a demonstration of a misunderstanding of site tactics. Kabakov's installation, a labyrinth of narrow corridor space (made to simulate Hotel Hell) was lined with old Russian photographs and acres of text. The viewer was eventually released into the "main gallery" area, which was filled with more artifacts, text and legend-keys — an ideological garage scale. The effect was not unlike a roller-coaster ride through a Russian novel, where the object was an unexpected departure and safe arrival-exit.

Daley, Holzer and MacKay, through their respective concerns, understand the meaning of brevity and the power of catching the phrase.

Ihor Holubizky