

HORTUS  
SICCUS



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William MacDonnell  
October 2 - 27, 1990  
Gallery 111  
University of Manitoba

## INTRODUCTION

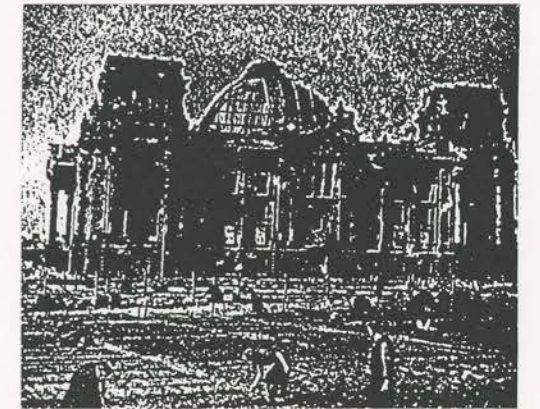
The Romance of Ruins. These works involve a particular examination of 20th century history held in place by an added focus on ruination; historical place and site are wedged between irony and a call for meaning. Here, architecture and landscape are distanced by history for these works are not 'of' history, they are not tied to the site or place or moment in ways our history teaches conclusions, what was 'true' to the moment. Rather, Bill's paintings propose *in* ruination the stopping of story-telling.

20th century ruins are left in ironic conflict. There is no return now to the garden, for our garden is sullied, conflicted by time and memory, by choice and decision, by our desires and drives. Desires that demand unity and closure, that demand meaning clear and accounting; drives that skewer each subject in conflict, confusion and repression.

The garden and our keeping of it (in secular or particular terms) is now in a state of unresolve, agitated by each of our losses. Innocence and seduction play out in this game played for, played as history, as historical moment, as our claimed historical meaning.

It can be said that time changes politics to aesthetics, and that battlegrounds become parks, gardens, or, at most, banal tourist spots; it can be seen that conflictual pressures of identity, memory, and place play on our subjectivities in every negotiation made in or through history. Each distanced moment, capable of separating witness from witness from witnessed, holds in tension either the political or the aesthetic, either desire, demand or repression.

Mary Scott





## A SHADOWED MEDITATION

If it seems that allegory saves things of the past from oblivion, it in fact also reveals the degree to which things of the present are encumbered by the past...  
(Benjamin H. D. Buchloh)

*Glistening, the wet of the paint... warm gold, bright sheet-snapping white, crimson...glowing in a dark, seething, tar sea... compelling...*

Painting is foregrounded in the history of art: A history which, as any other history or any other story, is a construction, contingent upon its telling, its representation. In his recent paintings, William MacDonnell speaks to the representation of history and, at the same time, the history of painting.

MacDonnell recognizes that painting is essentially an aesthetic practise — one that is implicated in history. And while painting cannot constitute *political engagement*, it can address a *politics* of painting. Through strategies of opposition and contradiction MacDonnell addresses critically the aestheticization of history and the practise of painting.

... Small-group violence employed in such a calculated and symbolic manner represents a kind of bargaining. It "creates facts" by announcing a cause that can no longer be ignored — a new capacity to make trouble that must figure henceforth in political calculations of great powers...  
(Richard E. Rubenstein)

*The images: angels, hovering, here only a trace, the shudder of a wing, sometimes a mere shadow mired in the writhing paint, a presence and an absence... and the ruins, the resonance of our media-generated memories, our recent history ... the bombing of the King David Hotel, the Reichstag — burning — catastrophe? vindication?*

*...the tables, the chairs, the pillows, — stained with colour this time, sparse, linear...a reduction...a denial of self?*

The diptychs, in the form of dual-panelled paintings, which juxtapose



historical and art historical images, are paradoxical. They suggest an interchangeability, even a neutrality. Contradiction and opposition are not imposed on history but are the conditions of which it is constituted.

Truth and falsehood are not sharply defined opposites, as is commonly supposed; nothing is wholly false, and nothing that *we* can know is wholly true. "We can know in a way that is false."  
(G.W.F. Hegel quoted by Bertrand Russell)

*...inscribed in the surface is the word: Hegel.*

The paintings negotiate a present which is constructed of the past, its representations, its resonances, and the processes by which these accumulate. Painting is implicated in history and history in painting. History is a narrative construct, compelling and problematic for its fundamental closure and tendency towards mastery. MacDonnell uses irony to problematize the underlying narrative structures. His paintings seduce, then contradict, allowing for disclosure rather than closure.

Fiction enables us to grasp reality and at the same time that which is veiled by reality.  
(Marcel Broodthaers)

*...brutally pink, the frame, the framing device, the museum, the market, the institution...*

The privileged and legitimized position of painting within history is not refuted by this work, but scrutinized and then delimited. Through the use of irony, MacDonnell wrests representation from stability; the accountability of Accounts is questioned. Representation's role in the production of ideology is investigated. The juxtaposition of images may seem perverse but it is this perversion that points to the fallacy of painting as political engagement and reappraises the underpinnings of painting as fundamentally aesthetic.





Cimabue has conceived the Crucifixion as a universal catastrophe. Christ writhes on the Cross, His head bent in pain — perhaps already in death, although this is impossible to determine in the present state of the fresco. A great wind seems to have broken loose, as if produced by the earthquake recorded in the Gospels, sweeping the long folds of the loincloth off to one side. Angels hover in the air about the Cross, their drapery also blown by the wind; and hands reach upward from the vast crowd below toward the Crucified, from Whose side pour blood and water into a cup held by a flying angel.

Cimabue's *Crucifixion* is difficult to decipher because the whites have oxydized and turned black with time; it is generally reproduced in a photographic negative. (Frederick Hartt)

Tension exists between wanting to — longing to — luxuriate in the exquisite beauty, the sheer painterliness of these pictures and attend to them — mutely — and the desire to delve further. The angels that recur in these paintings, MacDonnell has described as "mute witnesses", like us "can only agonize and watch" as the world is transformed by catastrophe. Then we, in our muteness, could stop here...but this beauty is a foil, for we are lulled not into sleep but into contemplation. And while painting (like the garden in earlier works) might, as MacDonnell has suggested, provide a place for meditation, it remains shadowed nevertheless by the history in which it is implicated.

The composition of the "Red Section" was to be kept absolutely secret even from other members of the Irgun. This was the "underground within the underground" idea — which did not succeed. It was daring, but its execution caused a mixture of difficulties, some of them not unamusing. Suddenly the best men, and even officers, began leaving the Irgun. Loyal members who had gone with the Irgun through thick and thin wondered and could not understand. *He* — a deserter? (Menahem Begin)

Vera Lemecha



CONSPIRACY OF ANGELS, 27 FEBRUARY 1933  
1986  
Acrylic on Canvas  
5'6" x 11'





ROMANCE OF RUINS (REICHSTAG)  
1987  
Acrylic on Canvas  
4' x 4'



CONSPIRACY OF ANGELS, 22 JULY 1946  
(Hegel's Pillows)  
1989  
Acrylic on Canvas  
5'6" x 11'



## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *SHADOWED MEDITATION, SAN MARCO* 1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
5'6" x 11'
2. *CONSPIRACY OF ANGELS,  
27 FEBRUARY 1933* 1986  
Acrylic on canvas  
5'6" x 11'
3. *28 SEPTEMBER 1936, NOT AN  
APOTHEOSIS* 1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
5'6" x 11'
4. *ROMANCE OF RUINS (REICHSTAG)* 1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
4' x 4'
5. *CONSPIRACY OF ANGELS, 22 JULY 1946  
(HEGELS' PILLOWS)* 1989  
Acrylic on canvas  
5'6" x 11'
6. *IN A FOREST NEAR SMOLENSK (A QUESTION  
OF AESTHETICS)* 1989  
Acrylic on canvas  
5'6" x 7'

## WILLIAM MACDONNELL

### BORN

Winnipeg, Manitoba 1943

### EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1979  
Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours), University of Manitoba 1977  
Isbister Scholarship, University of Manitoba 1975  
Bachelor of Science, St. John's College, University of Manitoba 1966

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *Romance of Ruins* Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary, Alberta
- 1989 *Paintings and Sources* " " dl Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1987 *A Conspiracy of Angels/Romance of Ruins* Stride Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1985 *Stride Gallery, Calgary, Alberta*
- 1983 *Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia*  
Torbolton Oaks Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario  
Off Centre Centre, Calgary, Alberta
- 1980 *Arthur Street Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba*
- 1979 *Eye Level Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia*  
Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1989 *Janet Cardiff and William MacDonnell: Dualisms* Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta  
*Image/Content*, Muttart Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1988 *Drawing* Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary, Alberta  
*Image/Content* Medicine Hat Art Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta  
*Out/Side/In* Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, Alberta  
*Works* Edmonton, Alberta  
*Survey Alberta '88* Alberta College of Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1987 *Homage to Marcel Duchamp* McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario  
*Aspects of Contemporary Painting in Alberta* Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta
- 1986 *Encounters and Enquiries* London Regional Art Gallery, London, Ontario
- 1983 *The Un-College Show* James Ulrich Gallery, Calgary, Alberta

- 1981 *Approaches to Paint* Gallery Moos, Calgary, Alberta
- 1979 *Heart and Head and Hand* Art Gallery of Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
- 1976 *The Manitoba 1976 Juried Painting and Sculpture Exhibition* Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*The Manitoba 1976 Juried Photography Exhibition* Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*Two-man show with Ed Pittner* Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*Fourteen Manitoba Photographers* Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*The Midwestern Juried Competition* Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

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"Historical irony fuels images in strong exhibit." *Calgary Herald* (January 17, 1990): E6.  
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#### EXHIBITION

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William MacDonnell

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