



Peter MacCallum

Vimy Ridge  
2005–2008

19 September to 22 November 2009

Oakville Galleries

in Gairloch Gardens

Curated by Marnie Fleming

# Vimy Rising: Peter MacCallum's ode to remembering

by Andréa Picard

*What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.*  
— Pericles

*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.* — Kierkegaard

The recent restoration and reopening of Walter Allward's magnificent monument at Vimy Ridge in the spring of 2007 inevitably ushered in a flush of nationalistic pride, as well as an attendant and contentious dose of recurring cynicism. Suddenly, as the glory and grandeur of this soaring sculpture was offered anew, the eponymous ninety-year-old battle's significance was up for another round of debate. As fervently pronounced as the arguments from both sides were, neither could—or sought to—deny the mythological might or the awesome power of Allward's memorial. Whether one believes that the taking of the seemingly impregnable scarp at Vimy by Canadian soldiers on a cold, blustery Easter morning on April 9, 1917 was, in fact, the metaphoric birth of our nation into the century, or a remarkable tactical feat (boosting morale, unifying the troops and cementing Canada's identity on the battlefield, but ultimately having little impact upon the drawn-out and devastating trajectory of the War), the Canadian National Vimy Memorial is a commemorative achievement befitting the cataclysmic losses suffered during WWI, not only by Canada, the Commonwealth and the Allies, but of all nations involved.

Despite (and also because of) the Second World War and the ongoing conflicts routinely making today's headlines, including Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, the Great War continues to haunt us. There were so many losses incurred and so much *not* to understand: its emotional, psychological and physical ramifications were

utterly profound and enduring, and its political implications were just as confounding and unfathomable on an intellectual level. Advances in ordnance made it such that masses of people could be obliterated in seconds, instantly upending previously held notions of mortality and time. When someone dies, the French tend to say that he or she *a disparu* (disappears). This idea of disappearance was more than poetic truth on the Western Front. The earth there has inherited more devastation than one can rightfully imagine, and physical remains continue to wend their way to the surface almost a century later.

Peter MacCallum, one of Canada's finest and most conscientious photographers, has followed and photographed the Vimy monument during the course of its massive restoration. Now complete, a selection of thirty-five photographs from his Vimy Ridge project forms a handsome exhibition at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, providing a mostly chronological portrayal of the gleaming limestone memorial's restoration. MacCallum's by turns stark and stunning black and white photos detail the artist's three trips to the site, his historiographic approach laid bare in his choice of subjects and distinctive, authorial compositions. As in some of his earlier series, MacCallum remains devoted to process, finding beauty in liminal states and the jarring pictorial and metaphoric juxtapositions that often result from the dynamic conditions of labour and industrial production. His portraits of workers are less about typology (say, from August Sander through the Bechers), personal narrative (like Lee Friedlander's suggestive working-class portraits), or the flare for (science) fiction as can permeate Lynne Cohen's large-scale and alluring photographs. MacCallum's subjects are not made strange—they are captured while working, classically, almost monumentally.

Page 1: Peter MacCallum, *Sculpture Representing "Spirit of Sacrifice," Monument Restoration Site (detail)*, 2006, gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 cm, collection of the artist.



Gleaning pertinent information about the restoration process and materials from the workers themselves, MacCallum includes the Belgian restorers combing the stone and re-engraving the names of the 11,285 Canadian

soldiers fallen and never recovered, for whom this monument officially stands. Luc Goemaere and Rudy Ronce are named in their photographs as the artist memorializes them and their work, itself a wrestle with time and

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Sculpture Representing "Male Mourner," at Entrance to the Upper Terrace, 2008,* gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 cm, collection of the artist.



the elements against the threat of forgetting. One could imagine such an image being used by W.G. Sebald, strategically slipped in amid passages bemoaning the failure of modern memory.

Their tools and technology—from the Mediaeval one-legged stool to the modern hydraulic lift and laptop computer—are featured, along with snake-like electrical wires, dusty bags of cement and other lumbering

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Rudy Ronce Applying "Combed" Tooling to the North Rampart, Monument Restoration Site, 2006*, gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 cm, collection of the artist.



machinery as the magnitude of the restoration is revealed through careful detail and acuity. In an altered state, wrapped in plastic sheeting and elaborate scaffolding, its base covered by a rectilinear greenhouse-like shed, Allward's monument is propelled into dialogue with new, if temporary, surroundings. (Fittingly, and with not a little irony, the contractor in charge of the job is called "Monument" and a sign with this very word is placed at the entrance of the site.) A captivating aesthetic exchange occurs between this construction setting and the allegorical figures of the sculpture, which from 1925 to 1936 were carved *in situ* from mammoth blocks of Seget, a limestone meticulously researched and selected by Allward and imported from an ancient quarry near the Adriatic.

In one of MacCallum's most striking photographs, *Allegorical Figure Representing "Peace" Atop West Pylon*

*of the Vimy Ridge Monument* (2005), the titular figure juts through a maze of steel poles, thrust upward, dramatically exposing her bony ribcage and breasts. The image is reminiscent of countless depictions of Saint Sebastian receiving a torrent of arrows, as well as the steel cages Francis Bacon returned to over and over again, pathologically imprisoning his blurry subjects within a jagged framework. More defiant than gothic, MacCallum's version is nevertheless epic and invigorating, arresting both in form and symbolism. Another scene including a female figure has the opposite effect, bestowing a sense of tranquility and even a bit of enchantment. In *Sculpture Representing "Female Mourner," Monument Restoration Site* (2006), the mourner reclines with her limply open book, as if in a waiting room, alone and expecting someone to fetch her. Her large, imposing

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Sculpture Representing "Female Mourner," Monument Restoration Site*, 2006, gelatin silver print, 30 x 45 cm, collection of the artist.



figure flouts the scale of her interim resting place; she dominates the space, commanding attention that no one will grant her. Absence, it seems, continues to dwell by her side.

A more palpable and ready-made absence marks the photographs in the middle gallery: the numerous cemeteries in the environs of Vimy Ridge and the Douai Plain in Northern France. The images are familiar to us.

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Terraced Entrance, Dud Corner Cemetery and Monument, Loos*, 2006, gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 cm, collection of the artist.

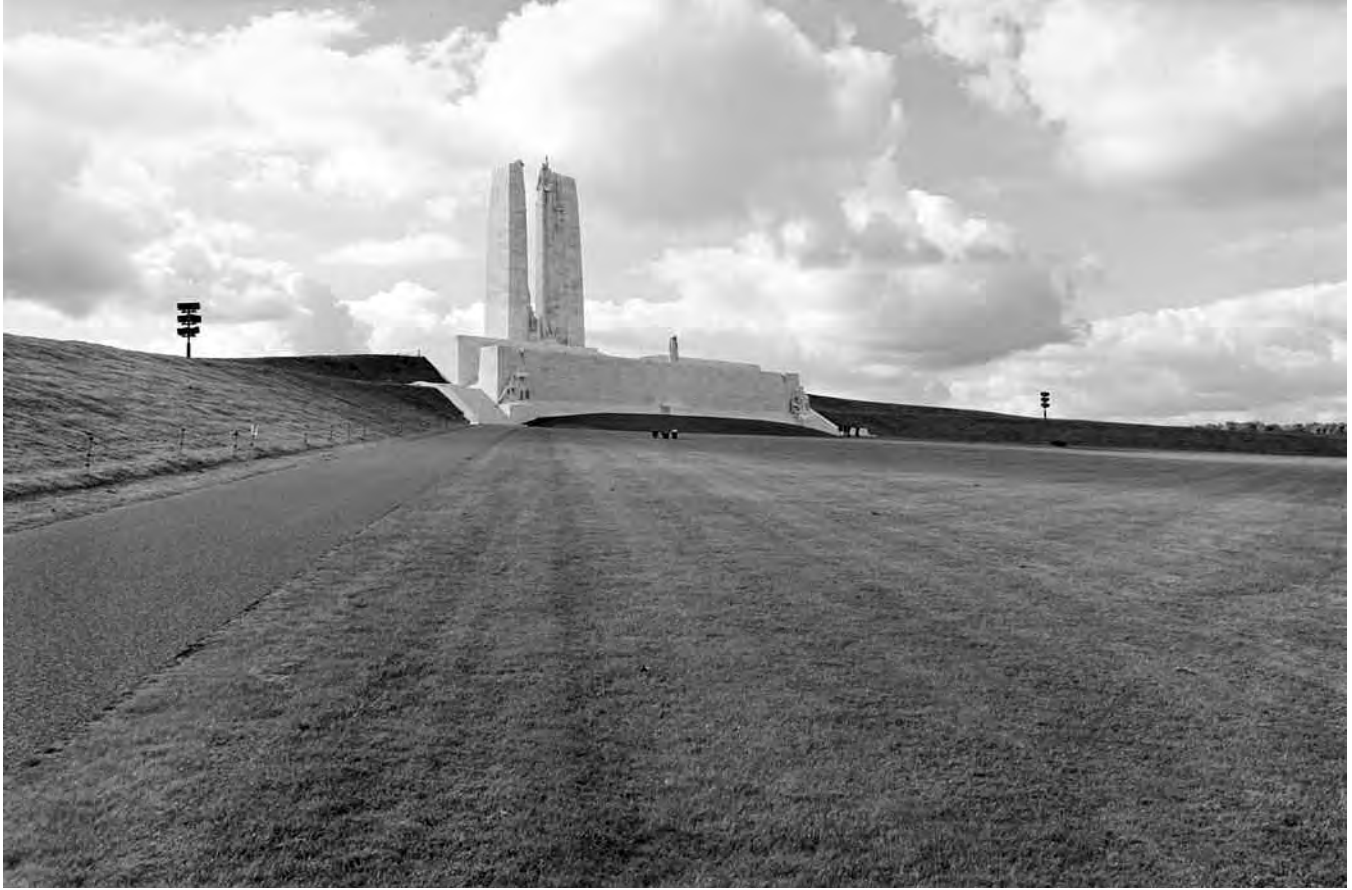


Rows upon rows of flat, simple tombstones travel across our collective memory, evoking a certain imaginary vertigo, borne of films and literature. MacCallum's images steer clear of this wholesale, iconographic approach. Rather, they are intimate in scope and depict smaller cemeteries, whose signature styles reflect a "kit of parts" design philosophy. Some feature modest mausoleum pavilions and a Stone of Remembrance designed by the British architect Edwyn Lutyens, whose Thiepval Memorial on the Somme is a severe counterpart to Allward's Vimy Ridge Monument. The hedging and plantings are a hybrid (or "métissage," as MacCallum poetically puts it) of English and French gardening traditions. These details are poignant, and serve to anchor the abstraction that has, over time, inevitably crept into the pockmarked crevasses. The rusticated stone crucifixes demarcate a

German mass grave, the largest in France, with over tens of thousands of soldiers buried there (*Mass Grave, German Cemetery, Neuville St. Vaast*, 2006). The crudeness of these crosses bespeaks the unthinkable: the horror and inhumanity of being murdered in a mucky field, and inexorably of murdering in that field. As bodies were not repatriated to their native lands in accordance with a standard policy instituted by the Allies, soldiers were buried very near or where they fell.

In *Interior of Arras Road Cemetery, Roclincourt* (2006), a chiaroscuro tree heavy with rustling leaves imparts a gust of wind as our eye is drawn toward the entrance gate, mysteriously ajar. Energy, it seems, is coursing through the land, its roiling skies a reminder of the weather's stern temperament (how can we not think of those mucky, sludgy trenches and the rain that continues

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Interior of Arras Road Cemetery, Roclincourt*, 2006, gelatin silver print, 30 x 45 cm, collection of the artist.



to fall, wreaking havoc upon Allward's Memorial). The surrounding landscape is crucial to these images, the backdrop of slag heaps indicative of the coal industry that once sustained life in these parts. More austere than MacCallum's photos of industrial production, these works betray a classical beauty, an ashen sublime where elegy intersects with a Naturalist, Hölderlinian impulse. The corpulent landscapes are preserved as reminders, incorporated into the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's memorial programme. As fluffy sheep graze fields that remain off-limits to the public, the potentially explosive mines are contained within a pastoral scene befitting a Dutch or Flemish painting. These are the sacrosanct sites of pilgrimage, charged with their own sense of paradox. While the gravestones could be consigned to the status of "anonymous sculpture" (a specialty

of Bernd and Hilla Becher), MacCallum chooses to shoot the sites with one eye toward historical documentation and the other toward aesthetics.

His focus on history and record embraces the vicissitudes that attend witnessing. He's not only interested in changes in form, but also meaning and context, and how these shift over time. His photographs of the completed Vimy Memorial defy a systematic approach while nevertheless partaking in the grandeur (and *gravitas*) of Allward's achievement in their attentiveness to light and shadow and the amalgam of Christian-mythological symbolism. The two towering plinths dominate the land, bordering on the tradition of triumph. One thinks of the numerous majestic triumphal arches or of Trajan's column. MacCallum's photographs detail the sculptural figures: their bereavement and their contorted grief; the

Above: Peter MacCallum, *Angle View of the Monument from Lower Walkway*, 2008, gelatin silver print, 30 x 45 cm, collection of the artist.



symbols of Peace, Justice, Truth, and Knowledge are eclipsed by the figure of Canada Bereft (weighing an impressive 30 tonnes) as she perches on the parapet, overlooking the tomb below and the great expanse of the Douai plain. She is the *mater dolorosa* (sorrowful mother) whose quiescence possesses the emotional effect of some of the most powerful expressions of shrouded mourning (from Bellini, Dieric Bouts, Rogier Van der Wyden, Rodin et al.) and also stands as a reminder to remember. This epistle unquestionably gains in the restoration. (How many monuments suffer from lack of upkeep and assume distressing nuances, like the shocking layers of filth built up on Rachel Whiteread's moving *Memorial to the Victims of the Holocaust* in Vienna's Judenplatz?)

From some of the photographs taken at a distance, we can see a major modification to the site—a new central walkway leads to the monument. MacCallum's *Axial View of the Monument from the Walkway* (2006) illustrates a group of tourists walking toward the imposing memorial, an image of unity, youth and hopefulness. Where once flowed two paths—forks in the road extending from the plinths in emulation of their cast shadow—there is now a single, wide promenade. Less dramatic than its original design, the new configuration affects not only the monument, but also the attendant grounds: it domesticates them, oddly rendering them tame. One might not be so inclined to consider this alteration were it not for the breadth of MacCallum's series, which spans the subterranean labyrinths beneath the ridge, the monument's sturdy buttressing system, the preserved

landscape of shell holes and mine craters, the farmers' fields where once were trenches and pillboxes; in short, the gulf between what once was and is now. MacCallum's painstaking photographs, in their focus on process and historical detail, are equally at home on a grander scale, commenting on myth, mourning and memory—Vimy's tripartite legacy.

**Peter MacCallum** is a self-taught Toronto documentary photographer whose work is primarily concerned with social, architectural and industrial subjects. In his *Concrete Industries* series of 1998–2004 he examined sites in southern Ontario related to the production and consumption of concrete and cement. This project is featured in his 2004 monograph, *Material World*.

In 2005, he documented the Lakeview Generating Station, the first of Ontario's coal-fired power plants to be shut down for environmental reasons. Later the same year, he began his series on Vimy Ridge in northern France, completed in 2008.

Since 2007, he has been documenting the commercial architecture of Toronto's lower Yonge Street. An exhibition of selected photos from this series is scheduled to run at the Toronto Image Works gallery in April 2010.

**Andréa Picard** is a Toronto-based writer, curator and film programmer for TIFF Cinematheque. She also curates "Wavelengths," the avant-garde programme of the Toronto International Film Festival. Her writings on art, architecture and film have appeared in *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings*, *Flash Arts*, *Prefix Photo*, *Canadian Architect*, and at Gallery TPW (Toronto) and Sonnabend Gallery (NYC). Most recently she has contributed essays to publications on Swiss painter-filmmaker Hannes Schüpbach and Dutch installation artists Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan. She also writes a quarterly "Film/Art" column for *Cinema Scope* magazine, exploring the intersections between film and the visual arts.