



A New Salvage Paradigm

GARETH MOORE and the secret lives of found materials

BY AARON PECK

Installation view of Gareth Moore's "Rocks on a Clock, Some Photos of Ducks, A Collection of Masks, And a Post to Touch" (2009) at Lütgenmeijer, Berlin
PHOTO HANS-GEORG GAIL. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES, GALLERY LÜTGENMEIJER, BERLIN



LEFT: *Rocks on a Clock* 2009
Antique clock, rocks, string
71 x 43 x 25 cm
PHOTO HANNA GEORGE SAGE

OPPOSITE: *My Clothes in the Woods* 2009 C-print 10 x 12 cm

My first meeting with Gareth Moore took the form of a walk. On the day of our hike along the tidal flats of Iona Beach Regional Park in Richmond, B.C., the sky was overcast with a slight drizzle.

Iona Beach, located on Iona Island, which is adjacent to Sea Island in the north arm of the Fraser River, is a rather anomalous space. From one side, you can see the rainforest-covered Endowment Lands of the University of British Columbia; from the other, Vancouver International Airport. Iona Island is one of those places in Greater Vancouver where you can feel far away from an urban metropolis and yet be within 20 minutes of the city centre. The only way to get there is to take a small access road northwest of the airport that meanders through an area of what would appear to be nothing more than tidal flats, airstrips and junk space.

The park itself is even stranger. At one end of the beach sits a sewage-treatment plant that serves the metropolitan area; the other is filled with industrial junk and heavy machinery. The expansive tidal flats in between are stunning. Long jetties on either side form breakwaters that protect the beach from the Strait of Georgia, and prove far more interesting to walk along than the beach. We walked by a "No Trespassing" sign amid the machinery, then passed empty beaches where the jetties extend out into the strait. The rain picked up: not enough to make the walk uncomfortable, just enough to become noticeable as rain. Along our way we found various objects, evidence of previous visitors—a ramshackle observation point made of beached wood, stone sculptures, disembodied pieces of crab shell.

Moore works with found objects that he salvages and then transforms. His art asks us to pay attention to the story each object withholds. Where did this thing come from? What happened to it before it became art? Much like the detritus of Iona Beach, the life story of any second-hand object is usually lost on us—unless, of course, the person to whom it used to belong tells us that story. Moore imbues objects with new stories by transforming them into sculptures or installations. His is a new salvage paradigm, an aesthetic one, one that takes junk and transforms it into something new instead of letting all the material around him go to waste.

So my walk with Moore along the jetties of Iona Island was an apt introduction to his work, since walking, found objects and landscape all figure significantly in his art. His recent *Uncertain Pilgrimage* (2006–07) took the form of a tour across large expanses of North America and Europe, and the gathered results felt like they referred to or obliquely represented landscape. One of the places his wanders led him was Lascaux II, for example; at Catriona Jeffries Gallery he later created a replica of that

itself-ersatz cave. Photos of his journey and photos he found along the way covered the walls in place of prehistoric paintings.

Moore has exhibited his work widely over the past couple of years: he contributed excerpts from the in-progress *Uncertain Pilgrimage* to a group show at Murray Guy in New York in 2007 (Moore in fact slept in the gallery during the installation of the exhibit), mounted a solo show, "As a Wild Boar Passes Water," at Witte de With in Rotterdam in 2008 and was part of two exhibitions at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, "Passengers" and "The Wizard of Oz" (both 2008). Needless to say, it has been difficult to see his work without travelling. As a result, in Vancouver—and, for that matter, most of Canada—his work has been as much rumour as reality. Prior to his solo exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in January, 2009 (which included what he described as "selected chapters" from his *Uncertain Pilgrimage* series) and "Nomads" at the National Gallery this April, his work had not been seen in Canada since 2007.

Before this year, Moore was known mostly for a collaboration with the Vancouver-based artist Jacob Gleeson known as the *St. George Marsh* project. Gleeson and Moore rented a space in a residential neighbourhood of East Vancouver and turned it into a curiosity shop-cum-museum of sorts. The space was zoned commercial and the duo were interested in exploring aspects of a commercial setting, so a small number of goods were available for purchase—buckets of gelato, soda, dry goods and fresh coconuts (which the artists would slice open for you). They also exhibited works by local artists such as Jeffro Halladay and Karen Birch. *Marsh* functioned as a venue for the display of things we normally discard, and for things people collect, fetishize and ingest. Moore and Gleeson transformed the *Marsh* space into a museum of ephemera. Some time after the project ended, the objects that remained were exhibited as an installation at Vancouver's Belkin Satellite.

There is an aspect of performance—or at least process—to Moore's work. For *The Road Through the Forest* (the piece he contributed to "The Wizard of Oz" and which he created under the pseudonym Lyman A. William), the staff at the Wattis blindfolded him and then deposited him in the northern Californian countryside. Using his skills as a traveller, he had to make it back to San Francisco in time for his artist talk, which would be an account of his journey. In a show at Catriona Jeffries in early 2009, he presented the objects he gathered along the way in a vitrine, which made for an uncannily museum-like display. All the cigarettes he found as he made his way back to the Wattis, for instance, were transformed into an effigy of an unknown traveller, which was placed next to the shoes he wore during the journey. The vitrine worked both as a surrealistic installation and as a representation of the journey.

A lot of what Moore does could end up being documentary, simply marking where he went or what he did, and the work would end there. However, the sculptures and installations he produces are autonomous aesthetic objects that work independently of Moore's performances. When one encounters them in a gallery, it echoes how Moore encountered them in the world: their history is not apparent, although it is obvious that each object has a story. What makes them successful as objects is their ambiguity. A chair with one leg missing, a bottle of whisky propping it up, could have some specific significance to Moore's travels, or not. The objects are accompanied by the potential of many stories—their hidden



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past, their part in Moore's own life—and the ambiguous relationship of these mysterious stories enhances their existence as art objects. It is this transformation from salvaged object to aesthetic object that distinguishes them from merely being a document of a performance. Whether or not we understand any of the stories these found objects tell is beside the point; they resonate with potential stories, and invite us to consider their mystery. At their best they are confounding, playful and, at times, strangely beautiful.

In April, 2009, Moore left Vancouver for Europe. He presented a solo

show in Berlin in May and took part in a summer residency in Dublin. Before he left, we met one last time for bubble tea and another walk, this time to VanDusen Botanical Garden on the west side of Vancouver. The sun was out, throwing clear light onto the North Shore Mountains. Rhododendrons, cherry trees and magnolias were in bloom. Moore had just returned from Ottawa and the opening of "Nomads" at the National Gallery. His installation there included work from the gallery's permanent collection, and this had presented a number of logistical problems: the borrowed material needed to be taken care of properly to prevent damage—interesting for Moore, given that he does not concern himself with how well his own art will survive. We discussed the impermanence of his work, which will deteriorate faster than most. The objects he presents, which have had many lives before becoming artworks, will break, deteriorate, decay, rust, wither and rot, continuing to change long after their usefulness as art has passed. ■

Look at more art by Gareth Moore at canadianart.ca/moore