

VANCOUVER

DAMIAN MOPPETT

CATRIONA JEFFRIES GALLERY

Since the late '70s countless Canadian schoolchildren have drifted off during in-class screenings of National Film Board historical vignettes, those humdrum dramas populated by blacksmiths, traders, and voyageurs in spirit-gum beards. Damian Moppett's installation *1815/1962, 2003*, made up of a video in which a nineteenth-century trapper played by the artist fabricates a bizarre animal trap in the Canadian West Coast rainforest; two maquettes on a plinth; and a large photographic poster, recalls these low-key meditations on pioneer pragmatism and self-reliance. This is familiar territory for Moppett, in whose work narratives of creative production often emerge from a mythological site and/or a nexus of art history. (The wilderness is one of many contexts—the indulgent courtly society portrayed by Peter Paul Rubens, the pastoral village, the urban skatepark, the rec-room tabletop are others—that Moppett takes as starting points from which to pursue activities in multiple guises, often playing the part of other artists.)

Survivalist theme notwithstanding, it seems this trapper's needs are less than pressing; he stands and ponders light filtering through the tree canopy as lingering shots of the forest coalesce and dissolve. Seemingly self-sufficient amid the benevolent wild, he nevertheless gazes broodingly out of the frame: possibly pondering the sublime, but probably listening for the unseen creature the trap awaits. No animal arrives, however, and the completion of the story is left to the two maquettes on a plinth near the entrance to the gallery. One we recognize as the trap in the video; the other is a card-stock reproduction in miniature of Anthony Caro's 1962 sculpture *Early One Morning*. On close inspection, however, the trap turns out to be an approximation in twigs of the Caro (a fact that's difficult to discern in the video).

Unlike *Early One Morning's* self-containment and synthesis, *1815/1962* dramatizes the incomplete status of its disparate elements. A sculpture appears only by proxy; dependent on explanatory maquettes, the video's *mise-en-scène* is thwarted by artificial effects that exaggerate the sound of wind, the play of light, and the swirling of leaves. Another fragment standing for something complete is the exhibition poster, a photograph framed as movie ad, which furthermore reminds us that this video forest alludes not only to



Damian Moppett, *1815/1962, 2003*, still from a video

scenic painting but to the representation of landscape in Vancouver photography. At points the whole chain of association becomes slippery: In the bearded trapper is there a reference to West Coast hippies, and, if so, would this constitute a pointed cultural counterpoint to Caro's iconic late-modern work? In fact, what *Early One Morning* and *1815/1962* share is playfulness: Moppett is interested in the mess resulting from time travel and genre splicing to such an extent that it becomes difficult to tell whether a given element quotes art history or Moppett's own practice. The maquettes refer both to Caro as Henry Moore's assistant—a further case of one artist working in the manner of another—and reflexively to Moppett's recurrent use of models, as the work travels not just from trapper to Caro but potentially through Moppett's other work and thus from Caro to Rubens and from history-saturated Old Europe back to a virginal New World. Moving from cluttered, closed lands to the imagined freedom of empty space and back again, Moppett's work unfolds as it retraces, negotiating the tangled snarls of history and the traps known as utopias—territories that close in on those who enter.

—Trevor Mahovsky