

Damian Moppett

Orchestrated perceptual play is rife with tensions.

by Amy Gogarty

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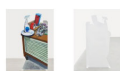
Damian Moppett, “Half Life,” 2023, installation view at Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)

Walking into Damian Moppett’s exhibition *Half Life*, at Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver, is a little like stepping onstage with actors positioned in a loose grid. Rather than hanging on the wall, Moppett’s free-standing paintings fully occupy the gallery space. In terms of image and concept, the installation is grounded in photography. It blurs boundaries, poses questions and hints at narrative.

The 54-year-old West Coast artist has long explored affinities between painting, sculpture and photography, and this exhibition is one of his most intriguing to date. Unlike much of his earlier work, which incorporated a bewildering array of art historical references, these pieces appear deeply personal, offering poignant glimpses into Moppett’s life and domestic environment.



Damian Moppett, "Flat Files and Cleaning Products," 2023, oil and enamel on aluminum, 59" x 28" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)



His paintings, on view until May 6, are made on flat aluminum panels contoured to match the images. Most are mounted on sturdy metal legs. Both the legs and the backs of the panels are painted gloss white. Several panels project directly from the wall or sit on the floor. The effect resembles a giant pop-up book or diorama through which viewers can wander at will. More than the physical forms, it is this spatial element that links the installation to sculpture.



Damian Moppett, "Half Life," 2023, installation view at Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)



Much of the overall impact derives from the gallery itself, as the installation appears carefully crafted to make the most of high ceilings, white walls and ambient light. In such a space, the white legs are all but invisible, letting the paintings float like small bursts of colour across a limpid field.

As one moves through the gallery, the painted fronts slowly merge into oblique views from the side. Turning around at the opposite end of the room generates an uncanny surprise: the white backs of the works merge with the white walls, causing the entire exhibition to seemingly disappear. This phenomenon creates a perceptual enigma, adding a physiological layer of interest.



Damian Moppett, "Bike," 2023, oil and enamel on aluminum, 44" x 19" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)



The images derive from photographs Moppett took with his cell phone and have the mundane quality of an Instagram feed. A tabby cat perches on a bright blue table, a large dog cuddles in someone's lap, half-eaten chips and a can of beer sit abandoned, and a hand reaches into a crowded spice drawer. In an adjoining gallery, a turquoise garden hose snakes around backyard furniture and an unlaced shoe loosely cradles a blue-socked foot.

Rendered in oil in a loose and brushy shorthand, the images suggest the influence of late 20th-century painters such as Philip Guston, Eric Fischl or Alice Neel. Overall, the colour palette is restrained, with browns, beiges, greys and blacks interrupted periodically by bright patches of blue, gold or red. Coloration and similarity of scale provide continuity between the works, reinforcing the impression of a contiguous space.

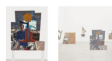


Damian Moppett, "Leopoldo de' Medici," 2023, oil and enamel on aluminum, 70"x 25" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

Overseeing the installation at the far end of the gallery, a Baroque bust of Leopoldo de' Medici holds court. Moppett's painting of the 17th-century cardinal, art patron and collector inserts the notion of the art world, which organizes and animates this *mise-en-scène*. This work also continues a long-running theme in Moppett's work, that of relationships between artist, studio and collector.



Damian Moppett, "Studio with Maquette," 2023, oil and enamel on aluminum, 57" x 26" (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries)



A painting at the installation's centre depicts a pensive man surrounded by the accoutrements of studio life. The figure is tightly framed and dwarfed by a colorful maquette. Coincidentally, it is the artist's father, Calgary artist Ron Moppett. Placing him centrally generates a psychological tension that belies the banality of the objects represented in other panels.

It is this tension that alerts us to the many complicated layers of history, narrative and perception that run through an apparently simple installation. The individual works are like puzzle pieces that viewers struggle to assemble. Yet even as two pieces fit, a slight movement or a change in position offers fresh readings and possibilities.

The various perspectives and angles present in the original photographs and reproduced in the paintings are compounded by the shifting views as one proceeds through the installation. Similarly, the imagined access to the refuge of home and studio is confounded by the family drama, strangely cropped images and references to art history. With its minimal setting, carefully orchestrated resonances and surprising perceptual plays, *Half Life* rewards careful looking and reflection. ■

Damian Moppett: *Half Life* at Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver from March 24 to May 6, 2023.