

# ART IN THE FAMILY

DOES CREATIVITY RUN IN FAMILIES? DAMIAN MOPPETT AND HIS DAD, RON, WHO EXHIBIT TOGETHER THIS FALL AT THE ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA, ARE JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF HOW FAMILY TIES PLAY OUT IN THE ARTS.

BY BEVERLY CRAMP

It's Sunday morning and Vancouver artist Damian Moppett is wired on coffee as he discusses his exhibition this fall at the Art Gallery of Alberta. He's just back from Montreal, where he was working on a potential commission – one he didn't get – and he's been up since 4 a.m. "Art is something you throw money at for 10 years before it begins to pay back," he observes, reflecting on his career since finishing his Master of Fine Arts at Montreal's Concordia University in 1995. Moppett's star began to rise after he was grouped with five other artists in a pivotal 1998 show, *6: New Vancouver Modern*, a nod by the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery to a new wave of conceptual artists. He now shows regularly at his Vancouver gallery, Catriona Jeffries, and has been in solo and group shows across

Canada, and even a few in Europe and the United States.

In a sense, Moppett has been preparing for his art career his entire life. He grew up around art, thanks to his family, and is partnered for the Edmonton show, *Every Story Has Two Sides*, with his father, Ron, a prominent Calgary artist. Replete with some 120 works, the show is unusual. Large public institutions tend to frame exhibitions around thematic and conceptual concerns, or a particular medium or era, rather than the personal circumstances of artists. Our celebrity-obsessed culture may fuel curiosity about how creative folk find their life path, but curators generally play down family ties. Indeed, Catherine Crowston, the gallery's executive director and chief curator, says the show does not highlight the father/son relationship. "Ron and Damian share interesting approaches to their work, but also have distinct differences. They both engage with similar questions about the history of art and the history of painting. But they each have taken different approaches."

Although a significant number of families with multiple artists – either within a single generation or spanning several – have made a mark in Western Canada, such connections are often little known to the general public. For instance, Damian's mother, Carroll Taylor-Lindoe, is an artist important enough to have work in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Her father, the late Luke Lindoe, was a noted Alberta painter and ceramic artist. Examples of other notable art families include the Koop sisters in Winnipeg, and West Coast aboriginal artists David Neel and his grandmother, the late Ellen Neel. Husband-and-wife combos include longtime Calgary artists Katie Ohe and Harry Kiyooka, who are turning their property into an arts centre as a community legacy. Another example? Former Calgarians John and Joice Hall are representational painters who now live in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. Their daughter, Janine, is also an artist, while their son, Jarvis, owns a Calgary frame shop and gallery.







ABOVE: Ron Moppett, *DawnLightningField*, 2014, oil and acrylic painting with mixed media, 90" x 108" x 72"

RIGHT: Ron Moppett (left) and his son, Damian

OPPOSITE: Ron Moppett, *Studio Night Orient*, 2015, alkyd, acrylic and oil on canvas with wood panel, 77.5" x 95"

It's an inescapable reality that artists influence each other, even more so when they live in the same household. In the domestic sphere, there are conversations about art, exposure to visiting artists and curators, and, in the case of children, even art lessons. A career in art, while often challenging, seems possible, unlike families where children are discouraged from pursuing art for fear they will starve. Art families, of course, have the same dynamics as any family – love and rivalry, closeness and estrangement, common interests and divergent views. And while some children of artists become scientists or engineers, others stick to the family trade, perhaps, in part, because visual thinking or drawing skills are passed on, whether through nature or nurture.

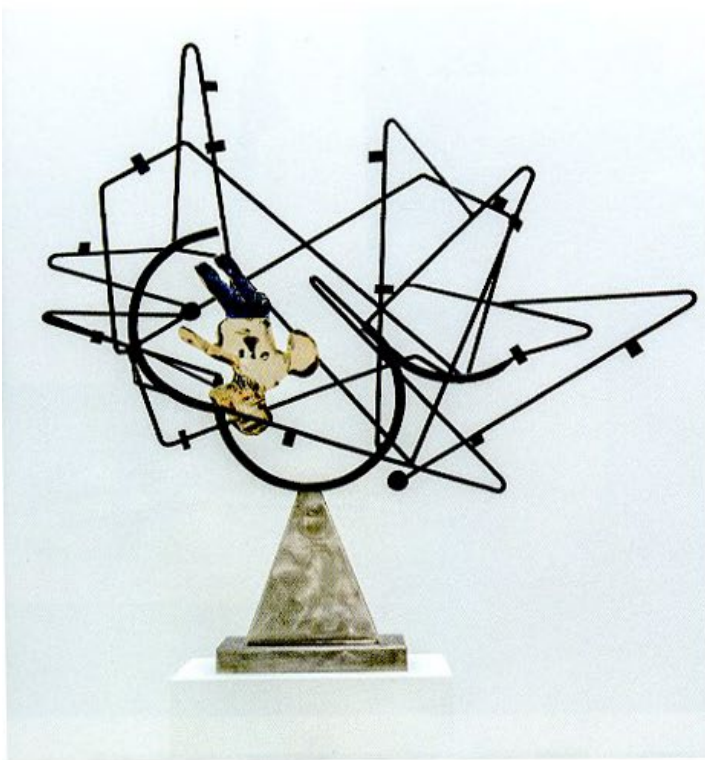


TOP: COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY TITENBERGER GALLERY; RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY



"We're both fans of art history."

– Damian Moppett



Damian grew up in the midst of his father's studio practice and was exposed to many artists when Ron was the director and curator of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at the Alberta College of Art and Design. Damian says his father didn't push him to pursue art as a career, but he gravitated to it after high school "when I figured out drawing was what I did best." During undergraduate studies in Vancouver at what is now the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Damian watched fellow students rebel against parents who worked outside the arts. "I kind of wished I was rebelling too," he recalls.

Instead, he embraced some of his father's interests.

"We're both fans of art history," he says. "We both are constantly looking at our own work in relation to things that we are really interested in historically. And we reference our own work to differing degrees. I do it more explicitly than he does. He references specific painters and shapes and forms – still-life forms or landscapes taken or referencing other artists and folded into his

paintings. I think when I do it, I do it more singularly. So, if I do a sculpture related to Rodin's, I'll do that singularly. His work doesn't speak to that at all. His are more camouflaged in his paintings."

The two men sometimes visit exhibitions together. "We discuss our reactions to these shows," says Damian. "But other than that, we don't talk about our own work to each other very much." For his part, Ron says he's interested in more than the latest trends when he goes to shows in London or New York. "I look at it as having a conversation with my peers," he says. "It's all alive to me." And he says he sometimes thinks "I've got to ramp things up" after spending time with Damian.

In Winnipeg, the Koop sisters grew up making art. Wanda, the best known, is a leading painter with an enviable exhibition record. But the family of six daughters also includes Elvira Finnigan and Kathryn Koop. Finnigan, the eldest, is a conceptual artist working in installation, video and sculpture. She says her creativity was fuelled early by supportive parents. "We grew up in a lively family. Our mother was extremely creative and was always encouraging us to make things. Both our parents were very interested in what we did. We didn't have a TV set. Rather we were makers of our own dramas." Finnigan says Wanda, in particular, showed a gift for art from a young age. "She kept the ante up ... She was voracious for the visual arts. She was a prime mover about getting everyone in the family to make things."

Kathryne wanted to distinguish herself from her older sisters and initially enrolled in science. "But I got disillusioned with my studies and ended up taking an evening pottery class," she says. "I loved it immediately." As a child, Kathryne had made things in three dimensions using papier-mâché, plaster, wood and even mud. Creativity was clearly in her blood. "I dropped out of science. I thought I would go into education and teach art. But I got so immersed in clay and pottery. Wanda was very encouraging. She suggested I go into pottery completely. It really changed my life." Sibling rivalry seems absent. "We are hugely proud of each other and not competitive," says Kathryne. "We share a lot of support and are excited when any of us have success."

Family ties – one might even say dynasties – are often found in First Nations communities, where skills are typically learned via mentoring. David Neel, for instance, comes from a long line of artists. His Kwakwaka'wakw grandmother from Alert Bay, B.C., Ellen Neel, is credited as the first woman to professionally carve totem poles. She learned carving from her maternal grandfather, Charlie James, a noted totem carver and the stepfather of famed sculptor Mungo Martin. David's father carved until he died in a 1961 car accident. David, born in 1960, initially trained as a photographer, but was tutored by Kwakwaka'wakw carver Beau Dick and became known for masks that address contemporary issues. His *Oil Spill Mask*, for instance, depicts a maritime creature inspired by historical masks of wildmen and sea monsters. His Vancouver gallery, Coastal Peoples Fine Art, notes that his children are following in his artistic footsteps.

The Moppetts' show, which runs Sept. 17 to Dec. 31, includes a wide range of work. Crowston points to Damian's painting, *Red Table*, which melds influences from various media. The image has complicated origins. "It's from a photograph I took in 1999," says Damian. "I was doing a fashion shoot and I was bored and began balancing things and taking pictures of them while the models were





ABOVE: Damian Moppett, *Red Table*, 2013, oil on canvas, 82.4" x 88.2"

OPPOSITE: Damian Moppett, *Bells of Hell / Star Cage*, 2013, steel, stoneware and wood, 84" x 50" x 20"

doing their hair. I decided to turn that into a series of photographs. Then about 15 years later, I decided to take that one image and play with it in Photoshop in order to make a really crude collage out of it using the forms and flat space, and turn it into a study for a painting."

For Crowston, Ron's 2014 work, *DawnLightningField*, is an equally interesting piece. It includes a photograph set up on the floor showing what appears to be a roadside artist in front of a crumbling building. On either side of the image are sculptural and found objects and, behind all this a painting hangs on the wall.

Crowston says both works consider the practice of art, but father

and son have chosen different approaches. "Ron's is done through layering of images," she says. "Damian constructs things and builds sculpture with things at hand. It is a systemized approach to bringing together different images and objects into a whole."

Art, like the larger society that births it, changes through time. Artists, naturally, can't help but reflect the interests of their era. Damian, for instance, engages a wider variety of media – video and photography as well as sculpture, drawing and painting – while openly, even blatantly, referring to 20th-century artists like Alexander Calder and Henry Moore. Ron, on the other hand, has generally remained steadfast to painting. "Damian works with photographs, sculpture and different media to achieve his ends," says Crowston. "Ron tends to stick to painting. When Ron does branch off from painting, he will still use paintings in that work." Their show, in a sense, thus reflects both change and continuity, themes that run not only through the work of father and son, but also through art history – and families of every sort. ☐