

VISUAL ART

Damian Moppett

Christopher Olson

“**I**nterdisciplinary artist” can be a loaded term. A friend and fellow artist once remarked over coffee, “One of the reasons you don’t get anything done is because you’re always working on five different projects at once.” Fair enough. (Thanks, Les.) Like the old Post-it note saying on my desk goes—“writers write.” But what if the writer works with music, video, painting, sculptures, drawing and pottery as well?

No matter how prolific, the interdisciplinary artist runs the risk of being labelled a dabbler—or worse, a dilettante. Western culture still enforces the “Jack of all trades, master of none” stigma as the antithesis of its work ethic—singular focus gets the best results, and the formula for success in the capitalist grand narrative is to do one thing you love and stick to it, to the exclusion of all other distractions, and, theoretically, success will follow. Work begets work.

Damian Moppett is one of Vancouver’s most diverse visual artists, working in a wide array of forms: photography, sculpture, painting



top: Damian Moppett, *Airstream Trailer*, 2004, graphite on paper, 20.3 x 30.5 cm. Photographs courtesy Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

middle: Damian Moppett, *G. Hutchen's Anagama Kiln*, watercolour on paper, 20.3 x 30.5 cm.

below: Damian Moppett, *Untitled (Stabile C, Raw)*, 2005, steel, wire and stoneware, 135 x 102 x 259 cm.

and music. His recent solo show at the Contemporary Art Gallery also brings drawing, video and ceramics into the mix. Rather than presenting his work from the position of the auteur, "The Visible Work" is an eclectic exhibit that elicits questions and observations on our culture's mixed notions of mastery and craft that still linger in a milieu where once separate disciplines begin—or are encouraged—to fade into each other.

In this instance, Moppett ventures into the realm of the Sunday painter (who happens to be taking pottery classes)—making art, but not the kind with a capital "A"—to play with precepts of quality and craft, showing the convergence of his contemporary art practice with more "quaint" or craft-based media. In one wing of the gallery there are various sculptures whose forms echo Alexander Calder and other old-school Modernists, made from traditional materials such as metal pipe, steel and wire. Instead of standing (or hanging) on their own as venerated art pieces, these objects are showcases to display his pottery. Upon closer inspection, the iconic forms themselves are not as solid and as seamless as they appear—like someone mimicking "proper" sculpture in a high school metal shop, they look tenuous, unfinished. The pottery itself tells a not-too-dissimilar story.

The artist threw himself into working with ceramics, learning how to mould and throw clay vessels in the short span of eight months. Starting from scratch, his crash course produced over 150 pieces, a selection of which are on display—clunky, a little wonky at points, with the obvious drips and

uneven glazing of a novice working in earnest, perhaps unwittingly displaying the tenets of *wabi sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of beauty found in organic imperfection. The work shows promise, or perhaps that's our coded response to these vessels. Allowing himself to be the amateur, the perceived "high" and "low" ends of the creative spectrum converge, echoing his previous works—visual remixes such as 1999's "Impure Systems," where point-and-shoot c-prints of film canisters, cigarette packs, toothpicks, etc. are precariously piled like a game of Jenga, posing—or existing—as sculpture. Here, hierarchies are done away with in a strategy of repeated collision.

In the other half of the gallery, a suite of watercolour still lifes of artists' studios with their attendant clutter adorns the walls, adjacent to pencil drawings showing a variety of homages to various influences—a speed metal album cover, Mike Kelly and Andreas Slominski sculptures, slapdash hippie houses from the Gulf Islands of BC, portraits of Alexander Calder and Ed Ruscha. The paintings are pleasant and meticulous in how they resemble the style of Stanley Park souvenir landscape painters, and the drawings have a detailed but overwrought look of pieces that line the walls of any foundation-year drawing class at any art school. This is not to disparage the work, but, rather, to point out the deliberate nature of his process in the context of the exhibit.

Presumably culled from Moppett's sketchbook, the images point towards research and the working through of ideas, but never arrive at the end point of the final work,

the venerated art object/product, stripped of its history, halogen-lit and waiting. Punctuating this idea is a three-channel video piece where the artist sets up and plonks away separately at a drum set, keyboard and guitar with numerous pedals. Here the fragmentary approach on each monitor leaves the viewer hoping for a cohesive whole or for the instruments to come into sync; instead, we hear and witness the raw material of creation and are left to fill in the blanks.

It all seems confounding at first, but the latticework of threads and associations begins to appear and the success of the show is that it is not as impenetrable (or downright Masonic) as, say, Rodney Graham's retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery (another self-confessed BC dabbler showing at the same time as this exhibit, by the way). Although it is not referred to among his drawings, sculptures and video, the exhibit strikes me as a continuation—or perhaps a paraphrasing—of *The Artist at Work* by another Vancouverite, Ian Wallace: a video loop and photograph of Wallace simply sitting at a desk and reading. Anyone intimate with the art-making process recognizes the basic but essential act of gathering information and images, analyzing and strategizing before any preliminary or decisive gesture is made. Like the old saying goes—"The painting is done when the artist decides to stop." In the case of Moppett's work, everything teeters on completion (im)perfectly.

"It's all about process" is the first thing you learn and is repeated as a mantra as you slog your way through art school. When looking at work, it's easy to get caught up in

a piece or summarily dismiss it with a wave of a hand before moving on to the next in search of some form of reverberation or eye candy. As consumers of images and texts, we forget about the process that goes into the product—whether it's the unseen hands that bring you the paper upon which this review is printed, or the dozens of test prints that get scrapped in order to bring you that one framed c-print. "The Visible Work" chisels away at Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura" that can only emanate from an original work of art, even parodying the art world's criteria for the veneration or dismissal of an art object. Duchamp, notably absent in Moppett's hall of fame, would be proud. ■

Damian Moppett's "The Visible Work" exhibited at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, BC, March 18 to April 24, 2005.

Christopher Olson is working, writing, and studying at ECIAD in Vancouver.

VISUAL ART

KC Adams

Cliff Eyland

The recent maturing of Manitoba's Aboriginal art scene is best summarized in a few names: Steve Loft, the director of Winnipeg's Urban Shaman Gallery, is hotting things up in that gallery's new digs; curator Catherine Mattes is turning things around at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba in tiny Brandon; and young artists such as Reuben Boulette and Roger Crait are making a splash in Winnipeg.

There is a new confidence among prairie Aboriginal artists, and KC Adams is at the head of the parade.

As biologists will tell you, there is more variation *within* any so-called ethnic group or "race" than there is between ethnic peoples. In Nova Scotia, where I am from, Scottishness tends to trump all others as the official ethnic identity within a mongrel

culture, at least as the one to which many people publicly aspire. Everybody has mixed blood and the right to choose among their bloodlines as they highlight their voluntary affinities. What a shock to some Nova Scotians, however, when about 15 years ago a rising young "New Scotland" Aboriginal artist named Teresa MacPhee changed her name