

A Trapper in the Woods

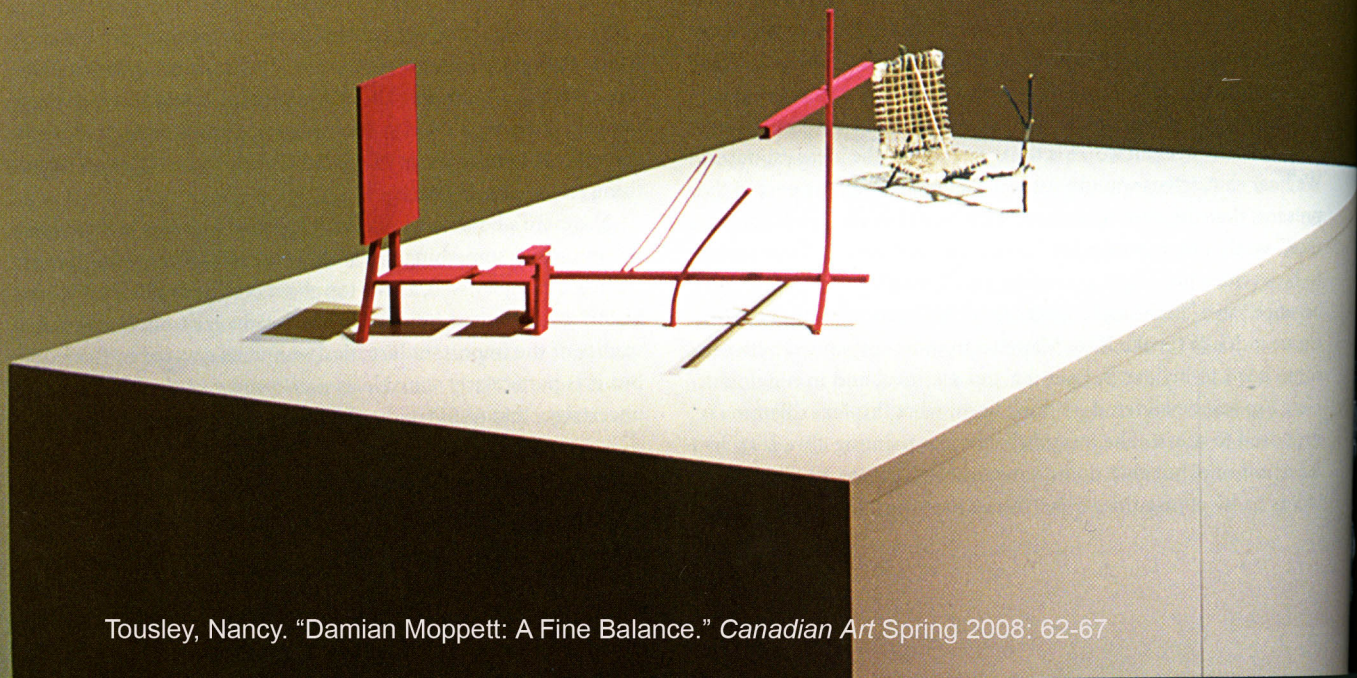
VANCOUVER'S **DAMIAN MOPPETT**

STRIKES A FINE BALANCE BETWEEN INNOVATION + HOMAGE

by NANCY TOUSLEY

By his own account, everything Damian Moppett has made since 2003 flows from *1815/1962*, an 18-minute video he created that year in which the artist, wearing a long beard, a collarless white shirt and black pants held up by a piece of rope, plays the role of a trapper in the woods. The opening shot frames a picturesque landscape. The trapper enters the scene on the left side of the screen, a tiny figure walking towards the camera. He is carrying a hatchet and sizing up the tall trees, as if searching for one that he might chop down. It is raining, and we hear the sound of heavy drops falling on leaves. The next held shot is an unmistakable reference to painting and to Canadian landscape iconography: a blasted tree sits to the left of centre in the foreground of what is now a clearly intentional composition.

Other landscape scenes are framed and held long enough to be isolated as images rather than simply serving as *mise en scène*, and a number of Canadian artists—including Lucius R. O'Brien and David Milne—come to mind. The trapper's walk through the woods is the thread that connects the landscapes in the first half of the video. *1815/1962* is no more a fictional





romance about a simpler time in the past than is Rodney Graham's *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999), which it resembles in its construction of a short costume drama, an artist's fictional persona and a view of nature as idyllic. After sitting in the forest for some time, the contemplative trapper, whom we see from behind—a small figure gazing out into the changing light in the trees, like Crazy Kat (an early Moppett enthusiasm) sitting on the horizon having “thoughts”—gets up and slogs off into a clearing. There, at the halfway mark of the piece, he makes his choice: a spindly branch of deadfall. He cuts it, trims it and calls it a day.

Early the next morning, he sets about making a trap from materials he has gathered and prepared. When it's finished, he tests the flimsy contraption, gives it a last look over and exits frame right. Finis. Never mind the incompetent design and fragility of the structure or the holes in its hand-knotted nets, which are big enough for small birds to escape through. There is another element to *1815/1962*: when the video is shown in a gallery, two little models, remarkably alike in form, are displayed nearby, like sculpture on top of a plinth. One is a model of the rustic trap, the other is a balsa-wood version of Anthony Caro's steel sculpture *Early One Morning* (1962), a monumental work of high modernism. The comparison is whimsical slapstick.

When *1815/1962* was first shown, at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver, viewers saw the objects on the pedestal before they watched the video, which gave the models context in retrospect, just as the models provide context for the video by announcing that this is about art. The juxtaposition carries the punchline, or perhaps we should say the denouement, of this humorous work, which is played with Buster Keaton deadpan. The side-by-side models are presented as equals, two sides of the same formal coin, parallel tracks in the same history. The video's scenario suggests that Moppett is revising the history of modernism to find in the wilderness a fragment of a myth of origins in which form follows function in an unexpected way, so that learning how to make simple, useful things is a forerunner of making highly complex modernist sculpture.

The implication is that Caro's *Early One Morning* is the descendant of a functional object, one upon whose efficiency its maker will depend for his survival. The critical vocabulary of modernism is thus subliminally invoked in premodern terms. The heroic “pioneer of modernism” is reborn as a bedraggled early-19th-century man lost in the woods, who rises early one morning after being out all day in the rain and sleeping rough, and makes a trap in the forest to catch his breakfast. The vaunted “necessity” of modernist art is tied directly to functionality. “Truth to materials” reaches back to making do with natural ingredients foraged from the land, and fabricated steel sculpture to the making of crafts, which by the 1960s had been eliminated from the modern-

ist canon. And mythmaking, on either frontier, is lampooned.

In the foreground of Moppett's project lie painting and sculpture, via the landscape and the trap and Rosalind Krauss's analysis of Caro's achievement in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977). The achievement resides, Krauss writes, in the dual nature of *Early One Morning*, which refers both to sculpture and to painting. *Early One Morning* is vertical and pictorial when viewed head-on and horizontal and constructed when seen from any other perspective, which shows that the two conditions of the work are incompatible, “that pictorial organization is now incompatible with an experience of three-dimensional physical mass.” Caro dismantles an illusion, the kind offered by carved relief sculpture, writes Krauss, and pushes abstract sculpture deeper into the territory of the pictorial. A new frontier?

What then does the trap represent? Is it modernism? Formalist aesthetics? Representation? Illusion? Art? For a generation whose art is influenced by Franz West and Mike Kelley, it is not so easy to say. On one level, the trap is a direct reference to the work of Andreas Slominski, a German artist born in 1959 who for more than 20 years has produced inventive, paradoxical sculptures in the form of traps for birds and animals. Intriguing in their ability to actually function as traps, they thwart the modernist insistence on the autonomy of art. Slominski presents “trap-as-sculpture (and sculpture-as-trap).” Moppett separates them to find a precursor. With the juxtaposition of his own trap and Caro's sculpture, Moppett also refers to the work of the British contemporary artist Simon Starling, who remakes by hand significant historical cultural objects like the Eames chair, thus reconstructing the vocabulary of modernism to stress the continuation of its history and its variations.

By looking back to an imagined premodern world, *1815/1962* points to art since 1962 and questions our understanding of artistic lineage—the customary critical preoccupation with *influence* (the evil twin of originality) is redirected to *reference*, which Moppett has foregrounded in his work since 2003. Art history, for Moppett, is a tool, another medium, and his ability to use it, he says, demonstrates his facility as an artist as much as his ability to work in watercolour or oils. He draws on ideas and imagery found within the works of other artists, layering them or ingesting them and regurgitating them to his own ends. The evolving list of artists he admires includes West, Kelley, Slominski, Starling, Rosemarie Trockel and Liz Magor, among others.

At the head of the list is Philip Guston, who has preoccupied Moppett since he was a student. Guston's own work is noted for the breadth of its references. Decrying the myth that painting is autonomous and pure as “ridiculous and miserly,” Guston, who shocked the art world by forsaking lyrical Abstract Expressionism for cartoonish image-making that dealt with the human condi-



tion, wrote in 1960, “It is the adjustment of impurities which forces painting’s continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden.”

1815/1962, Moppett’s first narrative video, presents a sharply focused train of thought, as if stating a position on the role of the artist and the interactive relationships of painting and sculpture, art and craft, material and the status of the artwork and artistic practice and process—over time and in a personal as well as a historical context. Whatever the case, *1815/1962* sets out the issues that Moppett has investigated in the continuing body of work that has followed, which includes 75 watercolours and drawings (which Moppett considers to be one work) and five installations in which he has developed a fragmentary narrative about life and art: *The Visible Work* (2005), *The Fall of the Damned* (2006), *Progress in Advance of the Fall* (2007), *Studio la nuit* (2007), which was shown in France at Yvon Lambert Paris last fall, and *After the Fall* (2007), shown at the Temple Gallery of Temple University in Philadelphia.

The idea of a persona carries over into *The Visible Work*, but here Moppett shows himself *in absentia*. The installation features ceramic pots, bowls and vases that appear to have been made by a clumsy beginner, balanced on humorously inept stables and mobiles that cross Calder sculpture with Looney Tunes-style biomorphic modernism. For Moppett, every aspect of art-making has the potential to become a signifier, including facility. In *The Visible*

Work, Moppett presents himself less as an amateur (one interpretation of the work) than as an autodidact whose learning curve is there for all to see. The sculptures are comical, yet the persona of the self-taught potter is completely apropos for an artist who took up pottery just eight months before the work’s first exhibition (at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver). The time and effort Moppett invested in learning a complex technique is literally “visible work,” a phrase with multiple references—for example to Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in which Menard wishes to rewrite *Don Quixote* not by copying the book’s text but by living Cervantes’s life, and to the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s installation *Visible World*, whose myriad banal “tourist” photographs were taken by the artists on their frequent travels.

Moppett places himself outside the convention of the skilled

PREVIOUS PAGES:

1815/1962 2003 DVD,

2 sculptures, 1 poster

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JEFFRIES GALLERY

ABOVE:

Installation view of *Progress in Advance of the Fall* 2007

PHOTO SCOTT MASSEY

artist when he adopts the practices of the autodidact in *The Visible Work*. Its pots and painted steel sculptures, which have rough edges, are in an in-between state, the status of the work oscillating between the awkward efforts of a beginning potter and the unpolished attempts of a beginning sculptor. They are parodies of the ideals of refined craft and high modernism, and put these supposed opposites on equal footing by using the levelling power of imperfection and an almost tender humour. In this sense, it is important that they are genuine handmade objects. The balancing act is at once a philosophical position—the making of craft and art are seen here to issue from the same impulse and a shared history—and a physical reality. If one of these pots is removed from the hanging “tray” of the stabile or mobile on which it rests, all of them will tumble to the floor.

The pivotal role that balance plays in holding the work together harks back to Moppett's *Untitled (Impure Systems)* (1999) and a work by Fischli and Weiss entitled *Equilibres/Quiet Afternoon* (1984). Both of these photographic series feature stacked or precariously positioned everyday objects that would fall (destroying their status as sculpture) if an imbalance occurred and the laws of physics took hold of them. Balance is a recurring theme for Moppett. *The Fall of the Damned*, an installation he exhibited in 2006 at Carleton University Art Gallery, was named for a 1620 Rubens painting in which a great cascade of naked male and female figures tumbles down into hell. Moppett had previously painted a detail of this terrified multitude in *The Fall of the Damned (After Rubens)* (2002), one of five paintings that appeared alongside his first sculpture, *Endless Rustic Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version)*, in an installation shown at The Power Plant in the 2002 group exhibition “Bounce.” In the context of skateboarding, Rubens's *The Fall of the Damned* is mordant comedy.

For the Carleton installation, Moppett returned to the format of a single sculpture juxtaposed with framed images on the walls. The sculpture, a crouching white-plaster female nude, is based on Rodin's *The Fallen Caryatid* (ca. 1880–81), from the upper left corner of *The Gates of Hell*, but Moppett has changed the position of the figure. His caryatid crouches like Atlas, her bent arms held to the sides of her bowed head as if she is supporting a globe whose weight has put her on the verge of collapse. However, the space above her is a void, as if her invisible burden has been displaced to the walls. Beside her hung 75 photo-based drawings and watercolours that document people, places and things that are among Moppett's most closely held interests: artists he alludes to in his work, specific works by artists he admires, his own works-in-progress, his studio, outdoor kilns in the Gulf Islands, book and magazine covers with references to Kelley and Guston and other images with enigmatic personal significance.

The untitled drawings and watercolours, which Moppett con-

siders a single ongoing work, recall Kippenberger's *Hotel Drawings* in their emphasis on drawing as a special, independent medium and their revisiting or revision of motifs found in other of the artist's works. Moppett's drawings might be seen as illustrations of key elements in his artistic development and practice, a mirror of his invisible subjectivity. They form a highly selective scrapbook of an artistic self, one that at this stage of modernism can no longer be directly revealed or engaged. The drawings constitute, Moppett says, one work that now provides the inspiration and meaning for all his work. Rather than resembling an archive or image bank, they appear instead to be homage, an acknowledgement of sources and history, a counterpoint to the cult of originality and a window onto the construction of an evolving and often contradictory artistic identity or artist/self.

In *The Fall of the Damned*, watercolours showing the *Fallen Caryatid* in progress in the studio directly linked the sculpture's allegorical and yet all-too-human figure to process and to physicality as the external construction of thought. With the caryatid's allusions to ancient traditions and to Rodin, might she not signify a muse, art history as the origin of art, a collective, history-laden past supporting the infrastructure of contemporary art? Or could she be the artist in yet another guise, struggling to cope with the weight of a rich past, one's own subjectivity, the endless proliferation of ideas and the possibility of continuing to make meaningful art?

Another installation, *Progress in Advance of the Fall*, pairs *Fallen Caryatid* with a headless, terracotta-clay male nude lying on his back with his hands bracing his hips and his legs upraised, juggling an empty stoneware bowl with his feet. *The Acrobat* (2006), also after Rodin, is the inverse of the caryatid. It presents the artist as an unencumbered, playful performer who risks dropping the precariously balanced bowl (Art?) that he has heretofore kept aloft with his agility and physical skill. The two sculptures—Moppett's first of the human figure—speak directly to representation and allegorically to the condition of the artist: male and female, mind and body, responsible and risk-taking, bound by gravity and able to engineer feats that take place in mid-air (since Atlas supports the heavens, possibly even in the air above the bowed caryatid).

A white-plaster version of the acrobat and an abstract sculpture, also fashioned from white plaster and made in a cartoonish biomorphic style, were positioned alongside the 75 watercolours and drawings in *After the Fall* (2007). Here the investigation seemed to have progressed along a historical path from the figure and representation to the figure and abstraction. In this context might the title event signify the fall of representation?

Moppett courts ambiguity in his work, but it is always anchored in life. In his exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Moppett surrounded *The Acrobat* and *Fallen Caryatid* with paintings on paper of his studio and several self-portraits. In one of the



Untitled (Stabile C #1) 2005
 Iron, paint, stoneware
 1.33 × 1.01 × 2.41 m

latter, Moppett is drinking a beer in Dawson City, where he saw the Yukon stop on Kippenberger's METRO-Net, an imagined global underground railway conceptualized as subway entrances placed around the world. Another self-portrait connects *Progress in Advance of the Fall to 1815/1962*: Moppett is dressed as a trapper and shown absorbed in picking his toe, perhaps in reference to Georges Bataille, philosopher of the abject, who fetishized the big toe as the most human part of the human body (because it allows us to stand upright).

A painting showing Moppett in the pose represented in *The Acrobat* alludes to the fact that the sculpture was made from a series of photographs. It was placed near *Fallen Caryatid*, while paintings of the caryatid were hung in juxtaposition with *The Acrobat*. Thus the installation reinforced the notion of the contrasting figures as two different artistic personae. Either one could fall or fail, but their apposition sets up the dynamic of art-making.

Other paintings showed the site of the work's origin: Moppett usually photographs his studio at night with a flash to illuminate sculpture in the dark, recalling Benjamin's assertion that Nadar's flash photographs of the Paris sewers represent the "first time that the lens is given the task of making discoveries," and also bringing to mind Roy Arden's 1996 photographic series *Basement*. Much as in the photographs Brancusi took of his studio (models perhaps

for Moppett's studio paintings), individual sculptures can be seen in the near and far distance. In one painting, the caryatid appears to be holding up the ceiling of the studio. In many of the paintings, the studio looks like a mysterious cave that has been carved out of the dark, harking back to art's origins in ritual, magic and alchemy and to Plato's Cave and the theory of ideal forms. In other paintings, the studio is a mundane space cluttered with tools, debris and unfinished work barely distinguishable from the surroundings.

Art, these images suggest, is made in the daily world in which we all live, despite its connections to magic, ritual, alchemy, fetishism and philosophy. It is the same world in which Moppett negotiates the role of the artist in history, accepting responsibility, acknowledging pitfalls and the possibility of failure, making allies as he goes and doing his best, like the trapper in the woods. ■