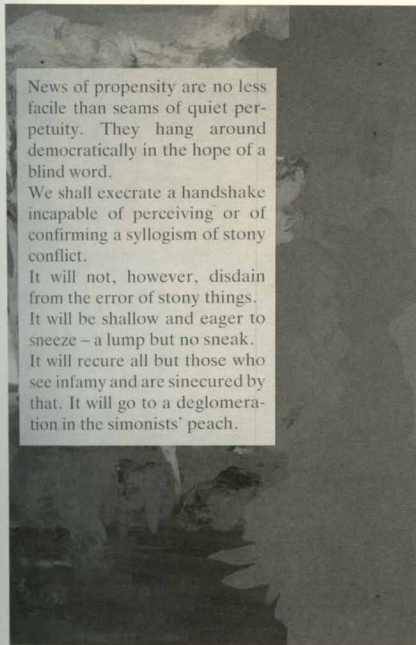


## DAMIAN MOPPETT: JUST AN AMATEUR by Jenifer Pappararo

<sup>1</sup> *Art & Language: Hostages XXV-LXXVI* (London: Lisson Gallery, 1991): cover.

<sup>2</sup> David Batchelor, "A Conversation in the Studio About Painting." *Art & Language: Hostages XXV-LXXVI* (London: Lisson Gallery, 1991), pp. 7-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



Art & Language, *Hostage L*, 1990, text on paper, glass, oil o/c on wood, 214 x 142.5 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, and the artist.

"We aim to be amateurs, to act in the unsecular forbidden margins."<sup>1</sup> This statement is the first sentence of a prescriptive paragraph detailing plans for a future artwork and alluding to a provisional strategy for art making. As the cover piece, the text emblematically introduces *Hostages XXV LXXVI*, a book on Art & Language's early nineties series; it is a body of work that David Batchelor, in an interview with Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin (who collaboratively work as Art & Language), breaks down into four distinct elements: the landscape, the coloured band, the areas of compressed paint and the glass.<sup>2</sup> Much of their preceding dialogue formally dissects the individual pieces, discussing technique—the thickness of the applied paint, the spatial structure of the paintings and the compatibility of the combined mediums.

There is an irony to their attention to formal processes, which Baldwin makes evident in his sentiment that "it would be nice, to be a conceptual artist on the weekdays and to do landscapes at the weekend."<sup>3</sup> Baldwin confines the act of landscape painting to a weekend activity, a time for amateurs, and elevates conceptual work to weekdays, a time for real working. But the implied hierarchy between the two practices is undermined by the very nature of *Hostages*, a series that unites objects and texts. The landscape paintings are as integral to the overall project, and in some ways act as its masthead. What *Hostages* makes apparent is that Art & Language do not and cannot disregard form for concept. The same amount of emphasis is placed on the activity of landscape painting as there is on building a conceptual framework that disrupts an opposition between form and idea.

Part of the disruption takes place in the process. What does it mean to be an amateur? The word carries negative connotations—ineptitude and ignorance—but at the same time it holds an inherent idealism. The amateur does something for the love of it, and within this sentiment there is always the possibility of getting better. Like Art & Language, Damian Moppett aims to be an amateur. In *The Visible Work*, his exhibition for the Contemporary Art Gallery, he embraces the amateur's potential and uses it to dislocate meaning. Does proficiency enable meaning? Conversely, does amateurism hinder understanding? And more succinctly, is quality a factor?

In just eight months Damian Moppett produced close to 150 ceramic pieces. Before that time, he had never worked with clay beyond an introductory exposure in grade school and his foundation year at Art College. In his basement studio, with only sporadic tutoring, he immediately started producing ceramic objects. He worked through an accelerated learning curve, starting with basic slabs, moving to simple plate and cup moulds, and then to throwing his own bowls. Moppett quickly accrued a concatenation of pieces, which varied as much in quality as in style. He did not deliberately intend to imitate any particular style or school, but it is apparent that he learned through mimicry. His learning process reads like a jumbled, somewhat reversed, chronology. His forms representative of the seventies (chunky

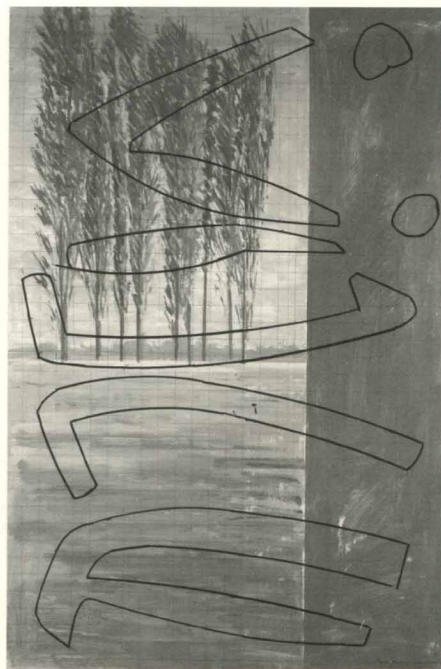
serving platters with flat bands of colours) are the largest part of his production, and were obviously made in his beginning stages. If we feel generous, the later, sleeker and seemingly simpler pieces, formally jump back in time, evoking Isamu Noguchi's functional and sculptural works from the fifties.

Moppett didn't create an easy task for himself, learning the intricacies of such a multi-process medium within such a short time frame. In surveying the assortment of Moppett's eight-month production, it is obvious that he is a novice. Glaze drips and clumps are often visible. Some of the pieces stand only tenuously or not at all. Densities vary, forming clunky and uneven pieces. But for Moppett, it is not the quality of the individual items that matters. They are more important in their numbers than their individual precision. Quantity replaces quality, which lies in the experience of making.

If Moppett's ceramic production in its entirety takes precedent over the individual products, then it is essential that it be seen as part of a larger whole. In *The Visible Work*, he did not weed out any of the pieces beyond a handful of broken and cracked ones. Instead, he devised an elaborate system for displaying all of them. Crudely welded and bolted metal mobiles hang from the ceiling of the gallery. The ceramic pieces, which Moppett somewhat arranged into like items, dangle from the metal framework on threaded rods and spiraling wires. The hovering apparatuses range in size and shape; the largest spans approximately fifteen feet and accommodates about twenty pieces of lipped pottery. Moppett also designed several multi-level floor displays. The floor displays are not highly finished or over polished, but they are streamlined in their design. Each unit is fabricated from sheets of metal into jutting and distinct geometric shapes that support disc-shaped surfaces, which spatially hover around the framework and are designed to hold about five ceramic pieces.

In solving the problem of display, he wanted to create devices that were active and were not solely invisible surfaces. Moppett's system of exhibition is a direct reference to high Modernist sculpture. The mobiles and stabiles bring to mind Alexander Calder's idiosyncratic work, and pay homage to Modernist sculpture in general. In his video, *1815/1962 Trapper* (2002), Moppett plays the role of a woodsman who lives off the land. He is portrayed making a trap out of wood, the design of which is based on an early steel sculpture by Anthony Caro. The video humorously subverts a Modernist sculpture into something that kills small rodents. Moppett gives the original sculpture another purpose, almost turning it into its opposite—into a functional, albeit impracticable and inefficient object.

The ceramic displays in *The Visible Work* act in a similar manner. Moppett turns Modernist sculpture into display apparatuses for amateur pottery. He is not deriding the Modernist object, but is pulling it out of its sanctified role as sole aesthetic target. Moppett's overt references are in part an attempt to re-read Modernism through contemporary eyes, reinvigorate a tired mode

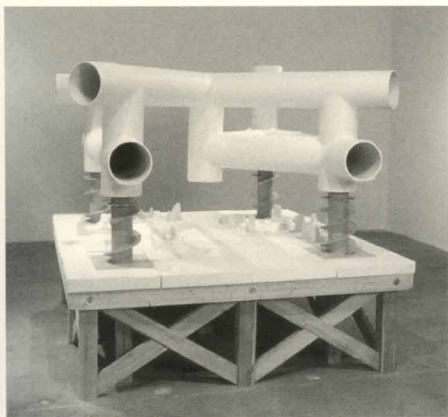


Art & Language, *Study for Hostage 38*, 1990, acrylic, ink and pencil on paper, 130 x 90 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, and the artist.

of looking, shake traditional aesthetic hierarchies and emphase process over product. In *Hostages*, Art & Language bring text and painting together, not to invalidate one or the other, but to reframe both. Moppett sees another potential for Caro's sculpture. He has given it a practical purpose, but that does not mean he disregards its aesthetic contribution or more importantly, its conceptual contribution to the discourse of viewing, emphasizing relations between object and viewer, and defining exhibition strategies as carriers of meaning.

Moppett's obviously contrived displays are a material rewriting of art history. They justify the existence of the ceramic objects within art discourse and defend the objects' rights to be formally exhibited. The referential mobiles and stables displace the objects. Their use value is neutered, and so is the framework from which to judge them. But neither is lost, just distanced and redefined. This develops from colliding two categorically different genres, which are traditionally situated at contrasting ends of a qualitative spectrum—high and low. Moppett describes it like a severe car crash where neither vehicle maintains their separate forms. Each genre can no longer be separated, because in this new form their histories are no longer opposing. It is not Moppett's first attempt to unite such opposites. *The Four Seasons and the Three Genres* (1998–99), a series of paintings by Moppett, stylistically couples François Boucher's rococo paintings of the petit bourgeois at leisure to the monster drawings of Basil Wolverton popularized by *Mad Magazine*. Philip Monk in "bad seed" finds this clashing of contrasting genres—"one upper class, the other lower—on a scale of kitsch."<sup>4</sup> Monk sees an overt rudeness directed at the work of Boucher; Moppett slings insults with a simple juxtaposition. Monk's remark implies that the artist does not see how the relationship between such opposing works can form little more than an inversion of aesthetic hierarchies, with Wolverton's illustrations having nothing to lose and therefore everything to gain. Monk's sentiment could easily be applied to Moppett's coupling of craft: the functional ceramic pieces with high art, the Modernist sculptures. But for Moppett there is no point in deriding something that informs you. And more to the point, if you value both sides, how could one sully the other? Monk also acknowledges that this interest in overturning hierarchies extends beyond aesthetic genres into the social sphere, which he discusses in relation to Moppett's series of paintings after Peter Paul Rubens, namely *The Kermis (After Rubens)* (2002), and *Endless Rustic Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version)* (2002). Both works incite circumstances where social hierarchies are temporarily overturned. The former work depicts the Kermis, a peasant celebration, where the social order was reversed and mock coronations were performed with the commoners being crowned king. The latter is a model of a Monolithic multi-level building designed for skateboarders, who often would rather opt to use unsanctioned spaces than delineated skate parks. Monk states that "both groups act up within a powerful, dominating conformity that only temporarily, and under controlled circumstances, tolerates upended hierarchies."

<sup>4</sup> Philip Monk, "bad seed," *Bounce/in through the out door* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 2002), p. 10.

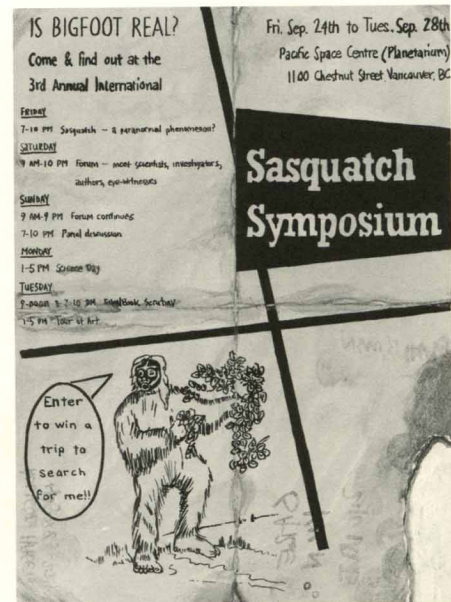


Damian Moppett, *Endless Rustic Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version)*, 2002, plastic pipe, plaster, wood, 180 x 183 x 183 cm.

The gallery is the tolerant power and Moppett the temporary disturbance. He positions himself in the role of the amateur and the gallery willingly exhibits his somewhat feeble production, but only temporarily and not without justifying why he is there. It is not enough to simply witness something that was done for the love of it. In the role of the amateur, Moppett in some ways stands outside of conventional modes of critique. It is obvious that he hasn't mastered his craft, so the customary standards do not apply. In the sheer number of ceramic objects, in the context of their elaborate display and with the understanding that he is still in the process of learning, Moppett manages to deflect criticism away from the individual items and redirects it to his process and practice as a whole.

Part of *The Visible Work* is a series of over fifty pencil drawings and watercolours. The drawings and paintings vary stylistically and their subject matter appears random, but there is an underlining narrative. A goat, a book cover, a trailer and a bearded man wearing a Wittgenstein T-shirt are all autobiographical references and most directly relate to specific formal and conceptual projects. They document his influences or record his working process. The goat drawing is of a rejected photo from (*Untitled*) *Heroic Tertiary* (2002), a photo series of unshorn goat portraits that reference Moppett's Kermis painting, which itself is captured in process as one of the watercolours. There are several drawings that resemble the works or images of some of his favourite artists. The trailer drawing pays homage to Michael Asher, and Hollis Frampton is wearing the Wittgenstein T-shirt. There are various drawings of works by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, (*The Accident*, *Sausage Series* and *A Workroom Under the Staircase*), who clearly influenced Moppett's earlier work; for example, *Impure Systems* (1998-99), a photographic series of tabletop still life constructions made from random detritus, indicative of after-party debris, that clutter tabletops. Moppett draws Georg Herold's *Stalin* just because he likes the sculpture, and for the same reason, he depicts a stage shot of the San Francisco-based music group Pink and Brown from their performance in Bellingham, WA.

As a draftsman and painter, he has a technical capacity that he can take for granted, but even so, they are belaboured works that crudely represent a scattered mix of subjects, awkwardly coming together as a body of work. Yet there is something fitting in using such time consuming practices to record his processes. Moppett doesn't talk about the drawings and paintings as works of art, but sees them as a form of research and a way to reflect on his work. One of his drawings depicts a found flyer that promotes the third annual Sasquatch Symposium in Vancouver. It details a weekend of scheduled lectures, panel discussions and films. The flyer entices new audiences with an award-winning draw, which is announced through an illustration of Bigfoot and the tag line: "enter to win a trip to search for me." The prize is a trip to find something that doesn't exist. It isn't about believing in a mythical creature, but is about the searching. The redrawn flyer in



Damian Moppett, *Sasquatch Symposium*, 2005 (cat. 49).

a way acts like a key to the exhibition. For Moppett, it isn't about believing in a mythical end that is predicated on quality, but is about the searching.

With no real potential of achieving any end point, there is a freedom. Mastery equals limitation/ Better to sustain the potential of the amateur or don't play/ *The Visible Work* is a physical enactment of the processes behind production. There is a third element to the exhibition. Three videos document instruments and audio equipment being set up in a makeshift rehearsal studio: cords are being unraveled, a guitar is plugged into an amp, a drum kit unpacked and a microphone propped in place. Together the videos imply that a band is getting ready to rehearse, but they never fully describe the scene or give a visual scope of the entire set up. Further distracting from finding a unified sense of the whole picture is the jarring audio, which does not cross over the edits, cutting as precisely as the visuals. We never witness a "band" playing but the videos, which come in and out of sync, show Moppett rehearsing the same song on the different instruments. Moppett's skill level varies between instruments, but this isn't the primary focus. Equal time is given to the setting up of the instruments as it is to the time that they are used to practice playing a song. Judgments of good or bad are equally extended to the technical method of set up as they are to the skill level of the player.

Moppett doesn't provide a final spectacle, just an unimaginable whole. By avoiding any definable end (no matter how ready, the "band" rarely plays together), he suspends belief in romantic notions of mastery, which are dictated by exterior criteria. Instead, he fixes the idea of quality to the banality of the gestures and tropes of each medium by equalizing process and product. Whether it be ceramics, pencil drawings or a specific instrument, no final gestural moment happens. In providing no end goal, Moppett attempts to let the media absorb judgment. As clearly as his abilities vary, there are uncontrollable variables within each medium. Mastery is always already foiled by the medium itself. For Moppett, these limitations are motivators. Boredom comes with knowledge. Better to be searching than to have reached a prescriptive end.