

DAMIAN MOPPETT

IMPURE SYSTEMS

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Damian Moppett ***Impure Systems***

"When we are no longer children, we are already dead."

-Constantin Brancusi

Flirting with systems, Damian Moppett's practice plays both at and with modernist and postmodernist tropes. Using genre, Moppett calls attention to the imperfect or impure nature of art history and theory's categories. A palimpsest of movements and moments, Moppett's work toys with the instability of the subject as opposed to the crystallized art object, the readymade, pastiche and ultimately functions as a mimetic tool that can be held up to discussions of originality and erasure.

Moppett's recent body of work, *Impure Systems*, is a photographic re-examination of the still life (its implications heavily rooted in historical painting) which takes three-dimensional doodles as its subject matter. In the jumble of information provided in the tableau-scale snapshot-esque photographs, the temporary sculptures have a slippery, ephemeral presence. Made from banal yet particular everyday items which include q-tips, lipstick, toilet paper rolls, cigarettes, Fuji film canisters and packaging, as well as the occasional french fry, these miniature monuments of detritus are captured for the instant of the camera's flash, perhaps immediately collapsing afterward or being dismantled when a cigarette is desired, lip color needed. From modernist forms to sputnik-like models to toppling towers of cosmetics, the constructions reference and reconfigure a century of cultural history while appearing to be the spontaneous result of a moment of monotony.

Like other artists of his generation, Moppett assumes and builds off of a wide base of predecessors. Because of this Moppett's

work demands an almost anthropological approach. The artistic and cultural references in *Impure Systems* are polyglot: studio shots à la Brancusi, Polke's balance, Fischli and Weiss's comedy, the Vancouver School's formal qualities, the evolution of staged subjects in photography, and the detritus or excess of the millennial first world. In earlier work Moppett's artistic allusions ranged from implications to direct quotes; examples include Philip Guston scenes constructed out of Lego and flaccid balloons and faithful copies of the Rococo painter Francois Boucher which Moppett then couples with his own doodles. One can approach Moppett's work in several ways, via cultural trolling or through postmodern theory, but it is the reoccurring theme of play – in its comic, surreal and absurd manifestations – which opens up his work for dialogue.

"Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative [artist], in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?"¹ Arthur Danto employed this quote from Freud in order to discuss the collaborative practice of Fischli and Weiss, categorizing their oeuvre into various aspects of *play*. Firstly, according to Danto, the duo rearrange things in their world in new ways which please them and secondly, they allow the things in their world to stand unrearranged "presenting transcriptions of reality so uninflected by their presence as to raise in an aggravated form the question of what makes it art."² Danto notes that there is also an intermediate stage of play in which they make objects that look like things in their world, cleverly arranged to appear as if they have been placed without premeditation, thus seeming radically unrearranged. These three factions of play coalesce to create an ambiguity or even an entropic erasure in artistic practice. Such open ended questioning of originality through reconfiguration and non-configuration is a methodology strongly linked to Moppett's practice. Like Fischli and

¹ Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (Vol. 9, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," 1907).

² Danto, Arthur. "Play/Things" in *Peter Fischli and David Weiss: In a Restless World*. Organized by Elizabeth Armstrong, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1991, p. 95.

Weiss, Moppett's oeuvre uses rearrangement, banal reality, and the simulacra, to take to task the aspects of play articulated by Danto.

Moppett's work further complicates play by demonstrating the creativity of the artist through re-examining not only objects but art already extant in the world. Moppett's reworking and mimicking of practices calls for a return to Freud's explanation of play. Freud understands that a critical part of (child's) play is to play at being grownup, to create what a child sees as intrinsic to the adult world. This type of play, which inherently involves mimicry, takes on the possibility of combined innocence and understanding. Moppett's mimicry of artists at once indebts himself to them (playing at being an artist by copying an already established figure) as well as subverting the categories that define them by exposing the construction of artistic fictions. Moppett presents illusions of naïveté, as do Fischli and Weiss, but adds another layer to artistic contrivance through artistic allusion.

In *Impure Systems* Moppett most overtly references mid-eighties work by Fischli and Weiss in which they documented balancing feats constructed from household objects. Like Fischli and Weiss, Moppett employs commonplace objects to create apparently impulsive constructions, yet the unforced appearance of the work in *Impure Systems* has careful, self-conscious ramifications. Moppett's work has followed Fischli and Weiss's in his animation of objects, using the ubiquitous cigarette, luncheon meat, cardboard buildings as well as rudimentary modeling clay. He has made and photographed pseudo architectural models, sci-fi dioramas and balancing acts which are all temporary in their three-dimensional form, but immortalized through the photograph in a post-conceptual gesture of claiming the temporary via photo-documentation. However, Moppett's work is not simply imitation/appropriation. It has a deeper psychology in which these art historical references are consumed by the artist, digested and ultimately manifest themselves as part of his practice's psyche which plays the unconscious off of self-consciousness.

Departing from the Fischli and Weiss-esque studio oriented or neutral backgrounds, the works in *Impure Systems* include a loose

narrative around the constructions, furnishing information about the working space of the artist which is unavoidably contemporary. The often blurry photographs were shot in situ and include not only the excess materials from which the constructions were fabricated, but the kitchen table upon which they were made and elements of the moment or situation that surrounded their construction. The odd focal points make the viewer work before the image, pulling the eye from foreground to background in a woozy manner, almost resulting in a reeling sensation. The photographs reveal empty glasses and female figures in the background – an arm, a torso – which give meaning to the mounds of makeup and photo-shoot debris from which Moppett builds his sculptures. One begins to understand that the materials were not sourced for the constructions, but derive from another event at which the artist was in attendance, seemingly in a state of boredom. One imagines Moppett fiddling with candles, cotton swabs, lighters and bobbypins like a child assessing the sculptural potential of his peas, carrots and fried chicken at a tedious meal.

The information yielded in these works implicates a behind-the-scenes look at consumer culture and demands politicization or at least critical commentary beyond the formal. The vague narrative can appear as a comment on the still life, glamour and the phenomenon of boredom in the face of information overload. Roy Arden writes, "Moppett's colours and technique appear to be derived from the commercial image. His choice of the still life, the throne room of the commodity, especially leads us to interpret his pictures as reflections of the conditions of late capitalism."³ The work's art historical references, its generational identification through brands of cigarettes and cosmetics in which MAC makeup is showcased (known for its alternative spokespeople such as gender bending RuPaul or k.d. lang), and connection to the filmic staging of Hollywood North opens up a dialogue as to where contemporary practice locates itself.

If Moppett is indicative of contemporary practices, especially in Vancouver, then one can address this at once cynical and comic

³ Arden, Roy. *Bonus*. Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1997, p. 11

approach in its contribution to ongoing discussions of authenticity and originality. In using the naïve, playful and childlike tack of sculptural constructions in the spirit of Fischli and Weiss, Moppett juxtaposes ideas of inventiveness (avant-gardeness) with dependency and imitation (postmodernness). The elements of playful pastiche in Moppett's work position him on the cusp of a post-postmodern phase in which pastichers such as Sherrie Levine are a given. Rosalind Krauss has been a key voice in the postmodern discourse, and the practices of mimicry and appropriation. She writes, "In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide."⁴ While Moppett employs appropriation and mimicry, using and copying other's work, he does so from a privileged position of distance that already looks at Krauss with hindsight, allowing for the framing of the next era of art making.

The aspects of (children's) play crucial to the processes of Moppett's work, whether the copycat game all children engage in (like the mimicry of postmodernism) or the (more modernist) fantastical reconfiguration of things in the world, allows Moppett to work from within the history of art, considering the art object, the readymade, and the copy. Rising out of a cynical moment, Moppett's constructions are utopian for an instant as they embody pure childlike invention, but quickly collapse back into bored cynicism. The notions of naïveté and originality are twinned within a discussion of play, where curiosity is crucial, and innocence and self-consciousness meet, allowing for the hybridity of artistic practices such as Moppett's. Iconoclasm is not what makes Moppett's work significant, but the self-aware referencing which engages and challenges the previous work and the viewer.

Thus we understand that Moppett's self-aware play loses all innocence in its self-conscious endeavor. The Duchampian shock of the mundane is already a given, as is appropriation and pastiche.

⁴ Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1987, p. 170.

What was formerly iconoclastic, for example Fischli and Weiss's glossy mediocrity in which the nondescript is aestheticized, has become a trope. For Moppett these tropes become building blocks for further discussion on the nature of contemporary practice. In understanding these givens, Moppett's work holds the deep-seated question of where does art go from here?

Melanie O'Brian
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