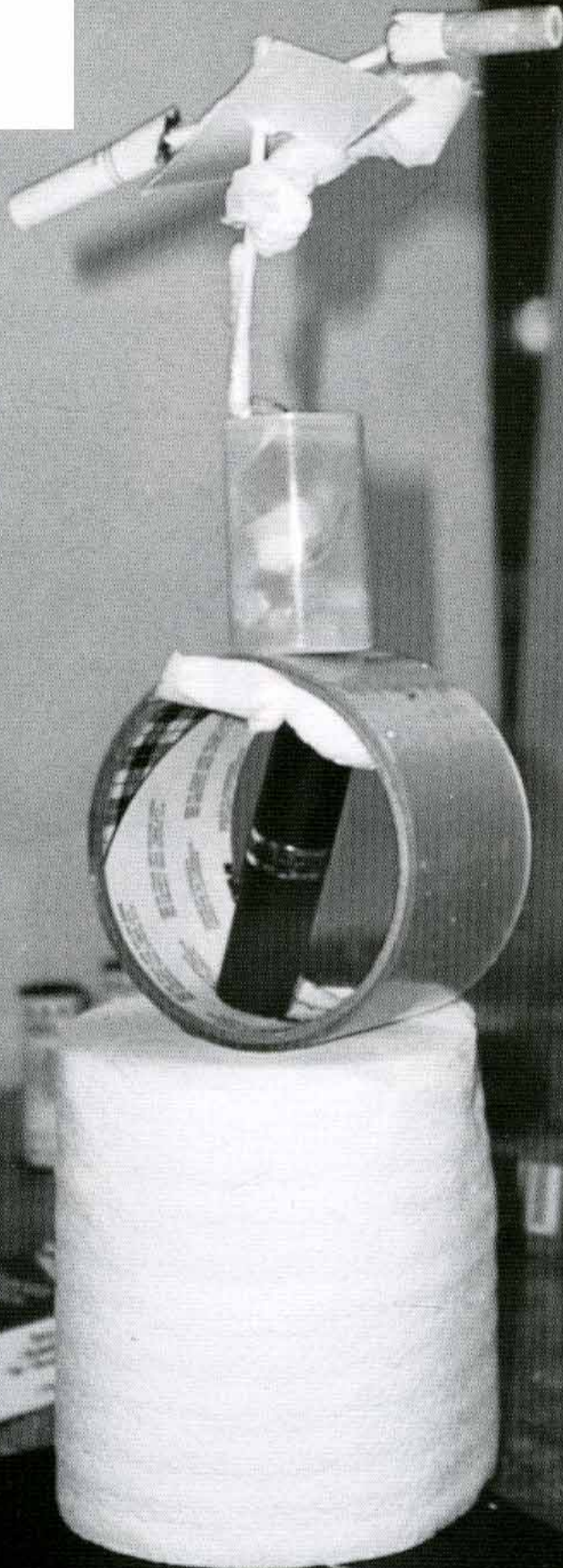


Damian Moppet
Untitled (Impure Systems), 2000
photo: courtesy the artist



IMPURE SYSTEMS AND THE CHAOS OF THE ANTI URBAN

DAMIAN MOPPETT INTERVIEWED

INTERVIEW BY MELANIE O'BRIAN

MELANIE WHEN MIX APPROACHED ME WITH THE TOPIC OF "ATTENTION ECONOMIES" I IMMEDIATELY THOUGHT OF YOUR IMPURE SYSTEMS WORK. THESE BLOWN-UP COLOUR SNAPSHOTS OF PRECARIOUSLY BALANCED SCULPTURAL DOODLES (BRANCUSIAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF Q-TIPS, MAKE-UP, CIGARETTES, FRENCH FRIES, FILM CANISTERS AND OTHER CAST-OFFS WHICH COMMENT ON A MODERNIST QUEST FOR NEAR-PERFECTION BEFORE IMMINENT COLLAPSE) ALLUDE TO THE IMPERFECT NATURE OF ART HISTORY AND THE CATEGORIES OF THEORY. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THIS WORK REFERENCES AN ATTENTION ECONOMY: THE WAY THAT ART IS FORCED TO FUNCTION, OR CONDUCT ITSELF, IN LATE-CAPITALIST SOCIETY.

DAMIAN I think of the sculptures documented in the Impure Systems photographs as stand-ins, or figurative spaces, which the author (imagined or real) and the viewer are meant to occupy. Since these spaces are composed of ready-mades or, more specifically, consumer products, the stand-in then becomes manifest of something manufactured. I didn't intend for it to be, nor do I think they could operate as, some sort of Orwellian vision of degradation of the "human" self; rather, I saw the sculptures as a depiction of time. More specifically, of wasted time within a specific situation and how that waste let itself be shown. Ultimately, it is a playful gesture due to the fact that social critique (the allegorical component of the work) only occurs after the objects become understood beyond their immediate symbolic form. Before that occurs they are extremely familiar markers of impatience and perhaps point more towards a territory of craft rather than, as you suggest, "art" in our late-capitalist society.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN USING BRAND-NAME MATERIAL IN YOUR WORK – CREATING FIGURATIVE ELEMENTS THAT DEPICT POSSIBLE PERSONAE?

If you consider the constructions in the Impure Systems work to be figurative elements composed of brand-name items, the possibility for a social critique developing out of "you are what you eat" is enabled. In the photos this is slightly sidelined by the fact that the majority of the building materials are the commercial materials of the photographer (Fuji film canisters, MAC make-up, etc.) and point

directly to the context (the photo) within which they are depicted. The other materials are cosmetics and lead one into the more slippery territory of the social construction of self. It is easy, in our contemporary condition, to consider our make-up as being an assortment of commodities, affecting our way of participating within a society. I see this as a fluctuating construct that almost defies illustration outside of the depiction of a particular moment. Obviously, the Impure Systems have sociological aspirations. Those aspirations exist on an abstract level. In the work, the descriptive form is abstracted to avoid any overly personal or solipsistic tendencies the pictured narrative may imply.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A TENSION IN YOUR WORK WITHIN THE NOTION OF ATTENTION ECONOMIES. YOUR PRACTICE HAS GAINED A REPUTATION OF REFERENCING CONSUMER CULTURE COMPLETE WITH FAST-PACED TRENDS, INFORMATION AND MATERIAL OVERLOAD, AND URBAN ENNUI. PERHAPS THIS TENSION RESIDES IN THE ART HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL LAYERING WHICH TAKES THE VIEWER A THOUGHTFUL AMOUNT OF TIME (AND WORK) TO UNPACK.

Everything I've done has the ability to fall back on itself. By this I mean that my work extends dominant symbolic meanings toward dual readings. Through working with specific historical references you often find they have a tendency to operate in a monosymbolic manner and have a completely fixed meaning. The object is to stretch the form to fit the applied context. I suppose this would be considered operating within the context of historical analogy. For example, the pairing of François Boucher's work (copies of his four canvases depicting the four seasons) with three adolescent monster drawings of tortured intestines and other body parts can be read as a simple polemical relationship between a specified/appropriated high and an unearthed low. My hopes have always been to extend beyond the obvious dichotomies while still being truly dependent on them to start the ball rolling.

IN TERMS OF SUBJECT MATTER, YOUR WORK HAS BEEN FOCUSED AROUND CONSUMPTION AND THE DIGESTING AND REUSING (I WANT TO SAY REGURGITATING) OF ART HISTORICAL REFERENCES FROM RUBENS TO FISCHLI AND WEISS. WHILE YOUR SUBJECTS CAN BE FRAMED BY THESE PARAMETERS, YOUR WORK HAS CERTAINLY MADE FORAYS INTO OTHER AREAS. I HAVE IT THAT YOUR WORK MAY BE MAKING A SHIFT TOWARD ART-COUNTRY (AS IN "ALT-COUNTRY") AND

THE CHAOS OF THE ANTI-URBAN.

I lean towards regurgitation myself...

As of a year ago I've become fascinated with a particular painting by Rubens entitled *The Kermis*. The Kermis is/was a northern European peasant festival that took place over a few days once a year. Rubens depicted, as did many other painters at the time (Bruegel, Watteau, Poussin), this subject with a slight twist: his depiction was from the viewpoint of the peasants and not from that of a tolerant lord observing from atop a hill.

After seeing the work and reading about it I became interested in depicting a contemporary version of the Kermis. Along with the Kermis painting there are various other works by Rubens that thematically relate: works such as *The Peasant Dance* or *The Triumph of Bacchus* inform the greater meaning or context of the European festival. I am copying each relevant Rubens painting and for each painting I am creating a contemporary narrative that mirrors the narratives in the Rubens' work.

Through working on contemporary versions of Rubens' work, researching and inserting various relevant contemporary interests of my own – skateboarding, biomorphic architecture, to name a couple – I've managed to develop avenues to explore while still being interested in, and maintaining, many of the qualities which are unique to his painting. One of those aspects is the rural setting in which Rubens set his *Kermis*. The location of the farm, complete with animals, is interesting because I see it more as a site of potential chaos or lawlessness rather than one of serene tranquility, work or ideally located domesticity. I think the difficult part is having farm animals play a serious part without them becoming two-dimensional metaphors for an extreme potentiality of human nature. Lately I've taken well over 200 photographs of goats and am still unable to articulate my fascination beyond a sense of wonder as to how alien they are. In relation to a narrative though, I find upsetting the calm of the pastoral interesting. To me the barn has always had the same potential as the ghetto for being a site of bedlam and anarchy.

UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES DID YOU BECOME FASCINATED BY THE KERMIS REFERENCED IN PEASANT DANCE (RECENTLY EXHIBITED IN THESE DAYS AT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY)?

The Impure Systems work was the first time that I spoke directly from the position of my own experience. Until that time I had been fascinated with modes of authorship, or rather, pretending to be a type of author that I wasn't. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was the architectural photos that I exhibited in the Vancouver 6 exhibition in 1997. Those photos were about the impetus to create something larger than oneself for the point of view of someone unable, for whatever reason, to actually realize this vision to its fullest. I chose architecture to represent the desire for grandeur, imagined immortality and creative vision, yet that vision was only to be realized in the manner of a maquette or physical sketch. The end result was unprofessional photos of these models in various domestic settings. So, like I was saying, I found myself moving into the realm of the personal (finally!) and needed to clearly and cleanly segue into more directly personal narratives. Without going on about it, I found the idea of festival and bacchanal, in both rural

and urban settings, interesting and personally relevant.

COULD YOU SPEAK TO THE HIGH/LOW DICHOTOMY SEEN IN THE ARCHITECTURAL MODELS, THE FOUR SEASONS AND THREE GRACES, IMPURE SYSTEMS AND THE ANACHRONISTIC TAKE ON RUBENS?

I've always had, like perhaps 99% of the rest of the population, a fascination with kitsch in its many manifestations. To see Boucher's work in all its Hallmark glory is quite amazing. It's hard to resist the temptation of wrong things in the context of art, be it maniacally crosshatching your drawings or whatever (the list is endless, thank God). A high/low dichotomy is terribly difficult thing to avoid if you are dealing with the subtlest form of abjection in relation to an art historical reference. Although I wouldn't want to spend a career making or blurring those distinctions, it is necessary to be amenable to that territory in a practice like mine.

WHAT ABOUT THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN YOUR INVESTIGATION OF ELIDED BOUNDARIES, PARTICULARLY FOR THE KERMIS SERIES?

Photography, or the photo, will serve as a very rough (budget) approximation of the cinematic apparatus. *The Peasant Dance* is a maquette for a short film documenting a fleeting moment between four teenagers passing through LA's Chinatown. Thus all the photos are "location shots", and are devoid of any of the four characters. I feel I have adopted this method of photography without the intention of abandoning any form it has previously assumed in my work. Since my use of photography, aesthetically and in regards to intention, is always evolving, it is my intention to have it assume a protean role.

AND THE DIALOGUE YOUR WORK HAS WITH THE INFAMOUS "VANCOUVER SCHOOL"?

I am respectful of the ground that "School" has broken, reclaimed and retread. For myself it has always been a practice that has existed within my peripheral vision. The inspiration to pick up a camera and to continue using it for myself has continued to come from different sources.

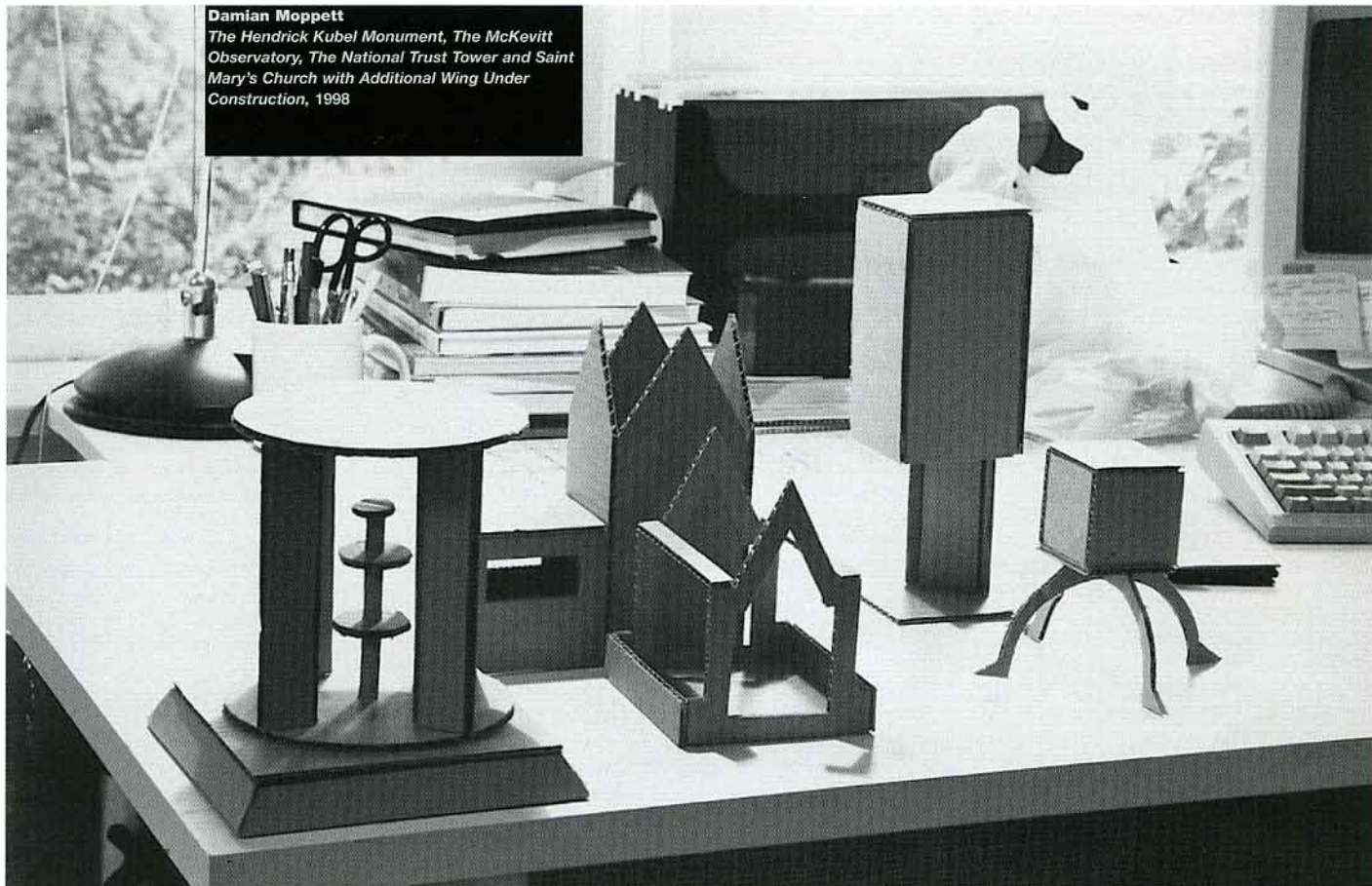
LIKE?

Well, first and foremost my inspiration has always come from painting and its history. In regards to photography it has been either from one of two extremes: fashion/product photography or people like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Zoe Leonard, Annelies Strba, Chris Williams or Peter Fischli and David Weiss: people who use photography yet would not necessarily be categorized as photographers per se. To me that "philosophy" is advantageous in regards to any and all media.

YOUR WORK ELUDES THE DISTINCTIONS OF DOCUMENT AND OBJECT. CAN YOU SPEAK TO THE LIMITATIONS OF MATERIALITY?

Exudes documenting the object perpetually. Beguiles the flogged argument exceptionally. Ultimately, I'm an extreme fetishist. I just always thought it was necessary to operate, in regards to media, in a mode most appropriate to the context. That sounds very arrogant and, of course, that is a highly subjective decision in regards to the "appropriateness" of one mode to another. Within that fluctuating ter-

Damian Moppett
The Hendrick Kubel Monument, The McKeivitt Observatory, The National Trust Tower and Saint Mary's Church with Additional Wing Under Construction, 1998



rain, though (let's not call it not being able to make up one's mind), it's quite entertaining to try to constantly redefine the source (or end location) of your aesthetic fetish.

WHAT ABOUT PRETTY PHOTOGRAPHY?

Pretty photography, for example, Chanel ads of blurry perfume bottles, got me interested in the medium in the first place. If I hadn't been teased by the seemingly unattainable aesthetic treasures lurking within the pages of *Vogue* magazine I probably never would have put down the brush.

The category of "pretty" is treacherous for so many reasons. I find it interesting that, for example, Stan Douglas's still photo work can simultaneously exist as parallels to his film and video work, can be as loaded and dynamic as the work which it accompanies, yet can also be dismissed by many as decorative "accessories" to the more complex – mechanically at least – work which it completes, or is completed by.

PRETTY AND INTERESTING ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE...

Absolutely.

APART FROM THE CORNERSTONES OF YOUR PRACTICE WE HAVE TOUCHED UPON – GROUNDED IN A POST-CONCEPTUAL 2001 DISCOURSE LAYERED OVER HISTORICAL CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS TO REVEAL THE PERSONAL – THERE SEEM TO ME TO BE ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES WHICH HAVE ALLOWED FOR A SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OR SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN YOUR WORK. LET'S TALK BRIEFLY ABOUT YOUR BAND,

SUNNY BONER AND TEACHING.

Being in a band is more a question of survival than anything. The "oh, you're entering into a dialogue with the public and with your peers by exhibiting, by allowing your work to be seen" statement so rarely feels like it's based anywhere in reality. Working collectively on a project, regardless of venue, brings on an entirely different type of gratification. The directness, the diplomacy, the difficulties, and even the dependence involved in working really closely with others, creates a level of satisfaction which had been foreign to me as an artist. In a way it's similar to teaching, in that you're forced to articulate ideas which often just rattle around in your head, never dreaming of escape in a clear way.

DO YOU THINK THAT TEACHING AND MUSIC RUN PARALLEL OR COUNTER TO THIS IDEA OF ATTENTION ECONOMIES?

I can see them both along the lines of creating or disrupting an economy of sanity. The "economy" (proper) of one is logical while the other's economy is a pit of writhing snakes. In regards to attention: in teaching you'll always get crappy students. And for music there's the ominous and fetid threat of top-40 radio play. Through participating both in teaching and music you're constantly saying, "Pay attention to me." Where is the economy in that?

Melanie O'Brien lives in Vancouver. Among other things, she writes.