



Shannon Oatway, Calgary Herald

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOWORKS: Damian Moppett, a former Calgary artist now living in Vancouver, has a show at Trepanier Baer Gallery that includes *Untitled (Office Pictures)*, 1996, color photograph (above).

Tousley, Nancy. "Playfully Perverse", *Calgary Herald*, February 15, 1997

playfully perverse

Still life compositions echo Moppett's off-beat humor

NANCY TOUSLEY
Calgary Herald

damian Moppett's playfulness attracts the attention like black clothing picks up lint.

His new photoworks have a magnetic pull. Teeter-tottering between absurd goofiness and big-time art-world seriousness, the 27-year-old Vancouverite's work has acquired an edge that he qualifies as "perverse" playfulness.

Why perverse? For Moppett, who was born and raised in Calgary and trained as a painter, it can mean using photographs of toys to express frustration, failure and sexuality, as he does in the show's largest work, the candy pink and blue and yellow *Ladder* (1996).

Taking the dictionary meaning of "marked by a disposition to oppose and contradict," the description suits the position a smart young artist takes to produce art that speaks to his own times, not those of his artistic forebears, and to get a toe-hold in contemporary art.

In Moppett's case, the playfulness is always in sight. A series of nine untitled photographs he refers to as *Office Pictures* is mordantly funny. Like the three large photoworks on view, each of these is a still life composed in the studio, pho-

Review

DAMIAN MOPPETT: GROUPS, a show of photoworks at Trepanier Baer Gallery, 999 8th Ave, S.W., through March 8.

tographed straight and in color, and designed to play the photograph's reality against the painting's flatness.

Say "still life," and most people will still think of tastefully arranged fruit and flowers. Not. The *Office Pictures* are arrangements of thwarted tools (broken pencils and busted leads, wood shavings, scattered pushpins, bent staples and crumpled Post-It notes), blobs (of plaster, paper mache and knead eraser) and spilled cigarette butts and ashes.

Photographed against suede backgrounds, the compositions are like little compulsively gathered-up heaps of debris or 3-D doodles suspended on rich, saturated colors. They signal boredom, bad habits and wasted time AND they're beautiful.

Even banal moments of real life can ignite imagination; being an artist is a job. The onlooker conjures up an image of the maker — bored, fidgety,

anxious, swimming in day-job tedium and waiting to get to the studio.

Another of Moppett's large photographs is composed of a fleshy, fat-veined processed ham, stacked yellow Post-It pads, a green garbage bag, a pink background — all seen through a "window" cut out of a sheet of white honeycomb styrofoam.

The entire image turns out to be a color photograph with uncanny depth, and the round, astonishingly naked meat quickly takes on the connotations of a stolid figure, comically, diabolically exposed.

Inspired by Philip Guston, the much-loved American painter whose late work drew on the artist's life in the studio to mirror the existential condition and featured a cartoonish, cigarette smoking, stubble-chinned persona, Moppett aims for his own version of tragicomedy, finding landscapes as well as figures in still life. The term could be a metaphor for works that are simultaneously funny and poignantly self-deprecating, wryly black tempered and verging on glee.

Somewhere in the background, Ignatz the mouse might be taking aim at philosophizing Krazy Kat, ready to bean him with a brick. Moppett's off-beat humor beats off more than boredom; it dispatches cynicism.