

DAMIAN MOPPETT

Unique Monsters

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It bears, as in a dream one bears the impossible and finds no deliverance.

— Rainer Maria Rilke on Auguste Rodin's *Caryatid*, 1902¹

Bearing the weight of history, Damian Moppett's practice is an accumulation of strategies that engage, distort, and reassert the systems of art production. In this Sisyphean task, Moppett finds his subject in his processes or methods, and in an underworld of idiosyncratic and tentacular references.² Allusion to the underworld is particularly apt in relation to the artist's recent exhibition, *The Fall of the Damned*. The title implies not only an art historical genealogy, but also the post-judgment journey of a soul towards a nightmarish Hades, a perpetual place of shadows and failure. More than any previous work, Moppett's sculpture *Fallen Caryatid* (pp. 16–17 and 41) implies the simultaneous toll (an albatross of personal and cultural history) and the potentiality of his complex and characteristic referential system.

Contextualized within Vancouver's contemporary practices, Moppett's work is consistent with local strategies of historical reference, conceptual rigour, and crisp aesthetics while it remains singular, even staunchly individualistic, in its approach. However, it is too easy to assume definability for Vancouver art. I propose to generalize here only for the sake of locating Moppett's work within some current trends. This said, while Moppett's Vancouver peers are an undeniable factor in the dialogues that continue to develop in his practice, his work extends beyond a regional context to an international one. Nonetheless, I am wary of setting up a binary of local and global, since Moppett's work functions on both levels and, arguably, the two levels collapse into one another. His influences and context beyond Vancouver are abundantly clear. As John Welchman writes, "Moppett takes his place in a distinguished genealogy of contemporary artists who have managed to captain their ship through the Bermuda Triangle edged by categorical innovation, aesthetic parody and social critique."³ In this genealogy he refers specifically to Mike Kelley's folk cosmologies,

appropriation, formalism, conceptualism, and self-reference, and positions Moppett as heir to these aspects of Kelley's practice, as well as drawing links to the work of Marcel Broodthaers and John Baldessari.

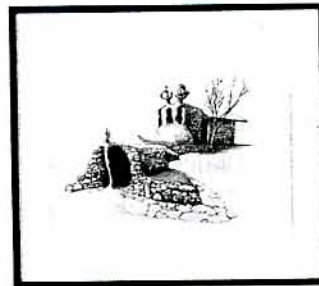
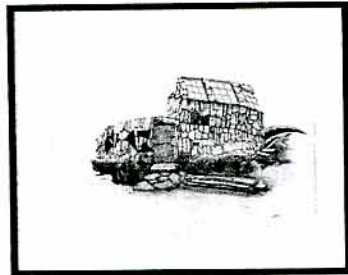
The work of established Vancouver artists (including Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, and Liz Magor, among others) has relied heavily on unpacking and representing histories that situate the local within the global. Often engaging a model of social art history, many of these artists' works engage postmodernism's shifting economies of late capitalism through photographic and filmic media.⁴ Artists of a younger Vancouver generation, including Moppett, continue to be distinctly conscious of history, both in the local and larger sense, art-wise and otherwise. This awareness of context has resulted in works that investigate the performance- and process-based aspects of art-making and find articulation in the documentary (here I am thinking of Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project* or Judy Radul's *Documents for Performance*), new wave institutional critique (Geoffrey Farmer's *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* or Brian Jungen's *Prototypes for New Understanding*), and historically referential and multifaceted installations such as those by Steven Shearer or the sort Moppett has been producing for the last couple of years. Much of this work engages with the forces of history and the processes of globalization, and — like the work of Arden and Graham — readily employs a specific example or instance to approach the wider failures of modernism. Addressing the social *vis-à-vis* the economies and products of consumption like many of his peers, Moppett reflects on a contemporary moment through the re-engagement of traditional methods and historical referents. His approach resists a straightforward consideration of popular culture, mass media, capitalism, etc., and instead approaches contemporary production sideways by revisiting older forms. The resulting work and its subjective systems complicate lineage, authorship, and ultimately reassess the processes of both art and craft.

In Moppett's particular emphasis on the operation over the product, reference takes centre stage. Whether art historical, local, personal, or mythical, Moppett's system of reference interferes with a linear understanding of influence.⁵ Instead, the tentacular comes back into play, creating a web that distorts hierarchies and organically conforms to a subjective system that is inviting but obscure to the viewer. The artist has noted that one work in particular is exemplary of his relationship to history, reference, and production. Included in his indexical drawings, he has rendered an altered book cover by artist and family friend, Rob Renpenning, which insinuates complex connections between Isaac Babel and Philip Guston (p. 61). Moppett's interest in Renpenning's practice lies in the latter's appropriation of and immersion in Guston's style and subject matter. Moppett notes that Renpenning

[...] would have known about Jorge Luis Borges' story entitled *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* and presumably would have noted the parallel between his own project and Borges' fictional account of Menard's attempt to write Cervantes' *Quixote*. Borges' Menard wished to reproduce the work word for word, not through re-writing, but through living the life of seventeenth-century Cervantes to the best of his ability in the twentieth century and thus producing *Quixote* as if it was being written for the first time. Rob had also read the works of Isaac Babel, which were also favoured by Guston [...]. Rob's book of Isaac Babel's stories had a reproduction of one of Guston's *Musa* paintings from the late 1970s, which he had taped onto the cover (see my drawing of book) ... In a way, the image of Rob's Babel book with the Guston cover is a perfect key to articulating my own relation to history, the works of other artists referenced through my work, a basic philosophy of authorship (understanding of specific concessions which need to be made to history when operating within it) and irony.⁶

Moppett's referential system is methodologically complex; its trajectories combine the canonical, the mythical, and the personal. Ultimately, it remains clandestine, corrupted by an internal set of shadowy devices.

His drawings, a mutable and growing archive, are exemplary of this clandestinity. The pencil and watercolour works, of which there are more than seventy-five, exhaustively inventory the web of references that play into his system. In *The Fall of the Damned* exhibition, the selected drawings provide a framework for the sculpture *Fallen Caryatid*, as much as the sculpture does for the drawings. The notion of the indexical — an overarching guiding principle — gets upset here, as the installation thwarted a linear relationship between the works. The drawings were arranged in loose groupings: historical, autobiographical, studio, rural architecture, Sasquatch, and caryatid.⁷ The details within each of these groups are revealing. Included in the historical group are drawings of artists and their works including Constantin Brancusi (p. 62), Alexander Calder, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Hollis Frampton (p. 63), Mike Kelley, Henry Moore (p. 27), Robert Rauschenberg, and others.⁸ Many of these figures have surfaced in Moppett's earlier works, either as formal references or as springboards for processual strategies. The autobiographic section is idiosyncratic, while the drawings in the studio grouping depict the studios of other artists and craftsmen, as well as Moppett's own well-considered space of production.⁹ The groupings of rural architecture show island dwellings, shacks, and kilns that are mostly West Coast (and lean toward the idealistic, mythologized notions of a frontier/utopian lifestyle), while the Sasquatch and caryatid groups present a more limited selection of images that point to figuration and deviant form.



Group 6 (rural islands) Sixième groupe (îles champêtres)

Form is key to Moppett's system of reference, as he continuously points back to an original. This original functions as a model, one that gets questioned for its authenticity and idealness. His insinuation of form as a reference point automatically engages with ideas around deviation and deformation in his work. The original is a jumping off point for various permutations, reconsiderations, and restagings that layer on top of one another. Moppett's work is a palimpsest of movements and moments that hinge on the changeability or instability of the subject as opposed to the crystallized art object. For him, the original (as a readymade) and the pastiche function as mimetic tools that can engender discussions of originality and erasure.¹⁰

Here, it may prove useful to engage the term *informe*, or formlessness. Taken up by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss,¹¹ the term is intended to complicate binary oppositions, such as that of form and content, positing that the formless stands outside such oppositions. Bois and Krauss's use of the *informe* has been described as showing "how one of [Georges] Bataille's most radical ideas, the idea of the 'informe' as that which breaks up any form, category, concept or meaning can be seen as an operative principle in a number of modernist works."¹² As it has been widely argued of Manet's *Olympia* that the subject was simply a pretext for painting itself, it can also be argued that in the formless, subject and form commingle. Base materialism, according to Bois and Krauss, is one of the operations of the formless:

[...] *the formless matter that base materialism claims for itself resembles nothing, especially not what it should be, refusing to let itself be assimilated to any concept whatever, to any abstract whatever. For base materialism, nature produces only unique monsters. [...] there are no deviants in nature because there is nothing but deviation.*¹³

In their anti-æstheticism, Bois and Krauss argue against Georges Didi-Huberman, who posits that the *informe* specifies a power that forms have to deform themselves constantly, to pass quickly from the like to the unlike (thus the *informe* is mapped onto the idea of deformation). While Bois and Krauss argue that this dichotomy between resemblance and abstraction is counter to their notion of formlessness, the idea of the constant slippage between form and deformation, as well as between form and subject, is a rich one for Moppett's work.

It is apparent that Moppett's work stimulates discussions around the abject — from his suite of photographs of organic bodily forms *In Studio* (1999–2000) to his ceramic works, and by extension the plaster sculpture *Fallen Caryatid*. Moppett appears to take on this raw material precisely for its potentiality, its ability to pass back and forth between raw and refined. Rendering form from mass, in the case of clay or plaster, has traditionally been

perceived as a literal metaphor for the artistic process, both professional and amateur. Moppett has chosen the most basic — if not basely material, *per se* — of materials. Clay and plaster are malleable, forgiving, reductive and additive at the same time. They physically reveal the material process of an artistic endeavour, though in Moppett's case these forms (such as *Fallen Caryatid*) do not necessarily deviate from nature, as Bois and Krauss argue, but from an art historical model.

Moppett's *Fallen Caryatid* is a life-size, crouching female nude that has collapsed under an unseen burden and is left holding up a void. Closely referencing Auguste Rodin's *Fallen Caryatid Carrying her Stone* (1881, p. 36) from *The Gates of Hell* (p. 20), Moppett's roughly modelled plaster figure develops the relationship between art and craft he began to question in his 2005 exhibition *The Visible Work*. Wanting to contest the categorical separation of sculpture and pottery, Moppett brought together an historic, modernist aesthetic with the timeless, handmade elements of ceramics to explore how they could exist both together and apart. The sculptures were professionally manufactured, yielding authoritative work, while the artist's hands-on learning process at the pottery wheel was revealed through the utilitarian and homely unfired vessels. The metal sculptures in *The Visible Work*, which reference Alexander Calder's mobiles and stabiles, derive their authority from a modernist sense of "pure" form, while the base ceramic works (thrown pots) function to bracket those more "elevated" forms. In light of the combined gestures and references contained in the earlier sculptures and ceramics, *Fallen Caryatid* functions both as a professional work, through its conceptual conceits and historical referents, and as an amateur piece, through its self-taught technique and readymade form. Moppett's work complicates such antagonisms as form and content or form and deformation, adding to them the dichotomy posited here between amateurism and mastery.

In troubling such easy readings, Moppett highlights the problems inherent in looking back. Referencing Rodin at this moment in time, the artist assumes an audience with a firm and somewhat static knowledge of the work. Rodin's work is a foundational marker in our modern art education, a basic building block for the expression of the modern condition. His deliberately unfinished or fragmented works leave room for the viewer to complete the reading of the forms and their meaning, and ironically, these meanings are unfixed and wonderfully unstable. In recognition of this, Moppett asks us to return and look again within a contemporary context. Moppett's *Fallen Caryatid* holds an empty space, a marker for incompleteness or for possibility. Hers is an inward-looking form — one that is repeated in many of the drawings — and the sculpture has an interiority that thwarts a reading of total collapse.



This literal looking in on oneself points to the reflexivity of Moppett's practice.

Figuration and realism are not new for Moppett, as the drawings indicate. In the case of *Fallen Caryatid*, one might ask whether historical referentiality is the subject, and wonder if the figure is simply a pretext. Certainly the contemporary viewer would understand character as type and nudity as genre, but what should we make of the female form? Although the expression of the carnal and the animal is a viable subtext of the work, and consistent with other works in which man's animal nature is examined, such as his *Endless Rustic*

Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version) (2002), I think that given Moppett's interests, the specific female form falls into a historicized category, and is less pertinent to this discussion than what happens when these layerings of pasts are brought together. The medium, form, and subject of the *Fallen Caryatid* are implicitly anachronistic, and their combined effect is to offer a critique of contemporary production, a counter to the mania for the new and the young. The multiple connections that can be made between the *Fallen Caryatid* and the drawings also pull the form out of a singular reading into an arena in which the fallen female form can be compared to the murky figure of the Sasquatch. The imagined or cryptid form of the Sasquatch lacks precise definition; its instability points to a continuous decomposition of fixed form and meaning. The reference to Rodin, and to a specific form, easily decomposes under a twenty-first-century investigation; the sculptural form not only engages in a critique of referentiality, but points to a potential deformation or damning of a static and predictable lineage.

The comparison between the original and its reiteration points to the readymade, specifically to the use of historical form in a new context (rather than to the Duchampian use of mass-produced consumer items). Moppett has not only considered the original in terms of form, but has also adopted the role of the amateur as a type of readymade, an already available role that he can appropriate and investigate.¹⁴ His 2003 video and sculptural installation *1815/1962* (above) depicts the artist as woodsman/trapper/modernist

sculptor. As in *The Visible Work* and in *The Fall of the Damned* exhibitions, Moppett identifies himself as a crafty, independent, self-taught survivalist cum art professional. His interest in bloodlines calls for a revisiting of older forms, forms that might be considered conservative, such as figuration, allegory, and portraiture. But like the openness created by Rodin's incomplete forms, those Moppett chooses to return to are ripe for repacking; the hierarchies are collapsed and the trajectories of the frontier of contemporary art and the myths of west-coast survivalist living (from trappers to hippies) are conflated and refigured.¹⁵

"How do we tell the difference between a return to an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made to displace customary ways of working?"¹⁶ asks Hal Foster. The complications of these returns include the questioning of authorship, the avoidance of cliché, pastiche, paraphrase, and the politics of the moment (particularly the demands of the commercial scene and the market-driven appeal of the new). It seems to me that Moppett works with historical forms and ideas, in part, to displace current trends. Foster sees the motives for the "return" not only in the wish "to restore the radical integrity of the discourse but to challenge its status in the present, the received ideas that deform its structure and restrict its efficacy."¹⁷ Moppett's reintroduction of a mediated and deformed original does exactly that; it challenges the original and the received discourse built around it. According to Foster, returns can reconnect with a lost practice as a means of disconnecting from present ways of working felt to be outmoded, misguided, oppressive — making a spatial move to open a site for new work. And Moppett, like Rodin, returns. If Rodin's *Caryatid* looked back to the Greeks and Michelangelo, his influences comprise a Moppett-esque catalogue that includes his contemporaries and historical Japanese, Egyptian, Aztec and French references among others. Rodin observed: "That which one commonly calls ugliness in nature may in art become great beauty. [...] it often happens that the more a creature is ugly in nature, the more it is beautiful in art."¹⁸ The deformation that Moppett takes from Rodin reverses the possibility in the monstrous; his underworld hinges on deviant form.

Not only does Moppett embrace nature and art's deviations, but his work runs counter to contemporary trends of production. Perhaps more so than other artists of his generation, he problematizes the historical and formal trajectories that are referenced in his own work (such as the use of Rodin, and Rodin's own looking back) and puts the lineages underground to ferment, to be rendered formless. Moppett uses borrowed form as subterfuge; his subterranean web attempts to defeat the trends of popular culture and contemporary art by offering a nuanced deviation from many originals. His references are monstrous

in their multiplication. His work, like the caryatid, verges on the edge of collapse under its borne weight, offering the potential of fertile decompositions and ongoing mutations.

NOTES

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin*, trans. Robert Firmage (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1982), p. 48. ² I am indebted to John Welchman's observations on Moppett's practice in "Damian's Domain," in which he notes his "underworld of forms" and his system of "subterranean reference, part rhizomous, part nefarious," in Jenifer Pappararo et al., *Damian Moppett: The Visible Work* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005), p. 16. ³ Welchman, p. 20. ⁴ I am thinking, of course, of the discourse arising from Jeff Wall's preoccupation with "painting modern life." ⁵ The notion of corrupting or deviating from a coherent system arose in Moppett's series of photographs entitled *Impure Systems* from 2000. ⁶ Damian Moppett, email to the author, 22 November 2006. ⁷ These labels are the artist's own and were not revealed in the exhibition. ⁸ The absence of Vancouver references is noteworthy. ⁹ Moppett's studio has become a focus of recent work. ¹⁰ Melanie O'Brian, *Damian Moppett: Impure Systems* (Vancouver: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 2000), unpaginated. ¹¹ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). Bois and Krauss take the term from Georges Bataille and work to realize their argument in the form of an exhibition and publication. ¹² Joseph Nechvatal, review of *Formless: A User's Guide* <http://old.thing.net/ttreview/septrev.05.html>. ¹³ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, p. 53. ¹⁴ See Jenifer Pappararo, "Damian Moppett: Just an Amateur," in *The Visible Work*. ¹⁵ In regard to the mythologies of the west coast, I'd like to acknowledge the spectre of Emily Carr that hovers over Moppett's strategies. Her Klee Wyck pottery and staunchly individualistic relationship to art history, contemporary art, and the landscape are an obvious, though often ignored reference in relationship to Moppett's practice. ¹⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 1. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3. ¹⁸ Sommerville Story, *Rodin: Sculptures* (Oxford, UK: Phaidon, 1979), p. 15.